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POOR WISDOM'S CHANCE.



POOR WISDOM'S CHANCE.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

"JULIET'S GUARDIAN," AND "DECEIVERS EVER."

"No. Vain, alas! th' endeavour
From bonds so sweet to sever.
Poor Wisdom's Chance
Against a glance
Is now as weak as ever."
Moore's Melodies.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.



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POOR WISDOM'S CHANCE.

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CHAPTER I.

ST. PAUL'S, KNIGHTSBRIDGE.

UPON the steps of the Charing-Cross Hotel, stood, one morning in June, a little French gentleman buttoning his lavender gloves. He wore a glossy new hat, a frock-coat, and a flower in his button-hole; he had altogether a smart and jaunty appearance.

He hailed a passing hansom and jumped into it, taking care as he did so to avoid brushing against the muddy wheel, lest he should tarnish the glories of his light-coloured trousers. Monsieur D'Arblet was more than usually particular about his

appearance this morning. He said to himself, with a chuckle, as he was driven westward, that he was on his way to win a bride, and a rich bride, too. It behoved him to be careful of his outer man on such an occasion.

He had heard of Mr. Harlowe's death, and of his grand-daughter's good fortune, when he was at Constantinople, for he had friends in London who kept him *au courant* with the gossip of society, and he had straightway made his preparations to return to England. He had not hurried himself, however, for what he had not heard of was, that clause in the old man's will which made his grand-daughter's marriage within two months the *sine quâ non* of her inheriting his fortune. Such an idea as that had never come into Monsieur D'Arblet's head; he had no conception but that he should be in plenty of time.

When he got to the house in Princes Gate, he found it shut up. This, however, did not disconcert him, it was no more than he expected. After a considerable amount of ringing at both bells, there was a grating sound within as of the unfastening of bolts and chains, and an elderly woman, evidently fresh from her labours over the scouring of the kitchen grate, appeared at the door, opening it just a couple of inches, as though she dreaded the invasion of a gang of housebreakers.

“Will you please tell me where Mrs. Romer is now living?”

The woman grinned. “She has been living at Walpole Lodge, at Kew—Lady Kynaston’s, sir.”

“Oh, thank you;” and he was preparing to re-enter his hansom.

“But I don’t think you will see her to-day, sir.”

“Why not?” turning half-round again.

“It is Mrs. Romer’s wedding-day.”

“*What?*”

That elderly female, who had been at one time a housemaid in Mr. Harlowe’s household, confided afterwards to her intimate friend, the kitchenmaid next door, that she was so frightened at the way that foreign-looking gentlemen shouted at her, that she felt as if she should have dropped. “Indeed, my dear, I was forced to go down, and get a drop of whisky the very instant he was gone, I felt so fluttered, like.”

Monsieur Le Vicomte turned round to her, with his foot midway between the pavement and the step of the hansom, and shouted at her again.

“*What* did you say it was, woman?”

“Why, Mrs. Romer’s wedding-day, to be sure, sir; and no such wonder after all, I

should say, and a lovely morning for the wedding it be, too."

Lucien D'Arblet put his hand vaguely up to his head, as though he had received a blow; she had escaped him, then, after all.

"So soon after the old man's death," he murmured, half aloud; "who could have expected it?"

"Well, sir, and soon it is, as you say," replied the ancient ex-housemaid, who had caught the remark; "but people do say as how Mr. Harlowe, my late master, wished it so, and, of course, Mrs. Romer, she were quite ready, so to speak, for the Captain had been a-courting her for ever so long, as we who lived in the house could have told."

The vicomte was fumbling at his breast-coat pocket, his face was as yellow as the rose in his button-hole.

"Where was the wedding to be? At Kew?"

“ No, sir ; at Saint Paul's church, in Wilton Crescent. Mrs. Romer would have it so, because that's the place of worship she used to go to when she lived here. You'd be in time to see them married now, sir, if you was to look sharp ; it was to be at half-past eleven, and it's not that yet ; my niece and a young friend has just started a-foot to go there. I let her go, because she'd never seen a grand wedding. I'd like to have gone myself, but, in course, we couldn't both be out of the house—”

The gentleman was listening no longer ; he had sprung into his hansom.

“ Drive to Saint Paul's, Knightsbridge, as fast as your horse can go,” he called out to the cabman. “ I might even now be in time ; it would be a *coup d'état*,” he muttered.

Round the door of Saint Paul's church a crowd had gathered, waiting to see the

bridal party come out; there was a strip of red cloth across the pavement, and a great many carriages were standing down the street; big footmen were lounging about, chatting amicably together; a knot of decently-dressed women were pressing up as close to the porch as the official personage, with a red collar on his coat and gold lace on his hat, would allow them to go, and an indiscriminate collection of those chance passers-by who never seem to be in any hurry, or to have anything better to do than to stand and stare at any excitement, great or small, that they may meet on their road, were blocking up the pavement on either side of the red cloth carpeting.

Two ladies came walking along from the direction of the park.

“There’s a wedding going on; do let us go in and see it, Vera.”

“My dear Cissy, I detest looking at

people being married ; it always makes me low-spirited."

" And I love it. I always get such hints for dresses from a wedding. I'd go anywhere to see anybody married. I've been to the Jewish synagogue, to Spurgeon's tabernacle, and to the pro-cathedral, all in one week, before now, just to see weddings."

" There must be a sameness about the performances. Don't you get sick of them ? "

" Never. I wonder whose wedding it is ; there must be thirty carriages waiting. I'll ask one of these big footmen. Whose wedding is it ? "

" Captain Kynaston's, ma'am."

" Oh, I used to know him once ; he is such a handsome fellow. Come along, Vera."

" Cissy, I *cannot* come."

" Nonsense, Vera ; don't be so foolish ; make haste, or we shan't get in."

Somebody just then dashed up in a hansom, and came hurrying up behind them. Somehow or other, what with Mrs. Hazeldine dragging her by the arm, and an excited-looking gentleman pushing his way through the crowd behind her, Vera got swept on into the church.

"You are very late, ladies," whispered the pew-opener, who supposed them to belong to the wedding guests; it is nearly over. You had better take these seats in this pew; you will see them come out well from here." And she evidently considered them to be all one party, for she ushered them all three into a pew; first, Mrs. Hazeldine, then Vera, and next to her the little foreign-looking gentleman who had bustled up so hurriedly.

It was an awful thing to have happened to Vera, that she should have been thus entrapped by a mere accident into being

present at Maurice's wedding; and yet, when she was once inside the church, she felt not altogether sorry for it.

"I can at least see the last of him, and pray that he may be happy," she said to herself, as she sank on her knees in the shelter of the pew, and buried her face in her hands.

The church was crowded, and yet the wedding itself was not a particularly attractive one, for owing to the fact that the bride was a widow, there was, of course, no bevy of bridesmaids in attendance in diaphanous raiment. Instead of these, however, there was a great concourse of the best-dressed women in London, all standing in rows round the upper end of the nave; and there was a little old lady, in brown satin and point lace, who stood out conspicuously detached from the other groups, who bent her head solemnly over the great bouquet.

of exotics in her hands, and prayed within herself, with a passionate fervour, such as no other soul present could pray, save only the pale, beautiful girl on her knees, far away down at the further end of the church. Surely, if God ever gave happiness to one of his creatures because another prayed for it, Maurice Kynaston, with the prayers of those two women being offered up for him, would have been a happy man.

And the mother, by this time, knew that it was all a mistake—a mistake, alas, which she, in her blindness, had fostered.

No wonder that she trembled as she prayed.

The service, that portion of it which makes two people man and wife, was over; the clergyman was reading the final exhortation to the newly-married pair.

They stood together, close to the altar rails. The bride was in a pale lavender

satin, covered with lace, which spread far away behind her across the tessellated pavement. The bridegroom stood by her side, erect and handsome, but pale and stern, and with a far-away look in his eyes that would have made anyone fancy, had anyone been near enough, or attentive enough to remark it, that he was only an indifferent spectator of the scene, in no way interested in what was going on. He looked as if he were thinking of something else.

He was thinking of something else. He was thinking of a railway carriage, of a train rushing onwards through a fog-blotted landscape, and of two arms, warm and soft, cast up round his neck, and a trembling, passionate voice, ever crying in his ears—

“While you live, I will never marry another man.”

That was what the bridegroom was thinking about.

As to the bride, she was debating to herself whether she should have the body of her wedding-dress cut V or square, when she left it with her dressmaker to be altered into a dinner-dress.

Meanwhile, the clergyman, who mumbled his words slightly, and whose glasses kept on tumbling off his nose, waded through the several duties of husbands towards their wives, and of wives towards their husbands, as expounded by Scripture, in a monotonous undertone, until, to the great relief of the weary guests, the ceremony at last came to an end.

Then the best man, Sir John, who stood behind his brother, looking, if possible, more like a mute at a funeral, even than the bridegroom himself, stepped forward out of the shadow. The new-married couple went into the vestry, followed by Sir John, his mother, and a select few, upon which the door was

closed. All the rest of the company then began to chatter in audible whispers together; they fidgeted backwards and forwards, from one pew to the other. There were jokes, and smiles, and nods, and hand-shakings, between the different members of the wedding party. All in a low and decorous undertone, of course, but still there was a distinct impression upon everyone that all the religious part of the business being well got over, they were free to be jolly about it now, and to enjoy themselves as much as circumstances would admit of.

All at once there was a sudden hush, everybody scuffled back into their places. The best man put his nose out of the vestry door, and the "Wedding March" struck up. Then came a procession of chorister boys down the church, each bearing a small bouquet of fern and white flowers. They ranged themselves on either side of the

porch, and the bride and bridegroom came down the aisle alone.

Then it was that Monsieur D'Arblet, leaning forward with the rest to see them pass, caught sight of the face of the girl who stood by his side.

She was pale as death ; a look as of the horror of despair was in her eyes, her teeth were set, her hands were clenched together as one who has to impose a terrible and dreadful task upon herself. Nobody in all that gaily-dressed, chattering crowd, noticed her, for were not all eyes fixed upon the bride, the queen of the day ? Nobody, save the man who stood by her side. Only he saw that fixed white look of despair, only he heard the long shuddering sigh that burst from her pale lips as the bridegroom went by. Monsieur D'Arblet said to himself :

“ This woman loves Monsieur le Capitaine !

Bon! Two are better than one; we will avenge ourselves together, my beautiful incognita."

And then he looked sharply at her companion, and found that her face was familiar to him. Surely he had dined at that woman's house once. Oh, yes! to be sure, it was that insufferable little chatter-box, Mrs. Hazeldine. He remembered all about her now.

There was a good deal of pushing and cramming at the doorway. By the time Vera could get out of the stifling heat of the crowded church, most of the wedding party had driven off, and the rest were clamouring wildly for their carriages; she herself had got separated from her companion, and when she could rejoin her in the little gravelled yard outside, she found her shaking hands with effusion with the foreign looking gentleman, who had sat next her in

the church, but whom truth to say she had hardly noticed.

“ Let me present to you my friend,” said Cissy. “ Miss Nevill, Monsieur D’Arblet—you will walk with us as far as the park, won’t you ? ”

“ I shall be enchanted, Mrs. Hazeldine.”

“ And wasn’t it a pretty wedding,” continued Mrs. Hazeldine, rapturously, as they all three walked away together down the shady side of the street ; “ so remarkably pretty, considering that there were no bridesmaids ; but Mrs. Romer is so graceful, and dresses so well. I don’t visit her myself, you know ; but, of course, I know her by sight. One knows everybody by sight in London ; it’s rather embarrassing sometimes, because one is tempted to bow to people one doesn’t visit, or else one fancies one ought not to bow to somebody one does. I’ve made some dreadfully stupid mistakes myself

sometimes. Did you notice the rose point on that old lady's brown satin, Vera ? ”

“ That was Lady Kynaston.”

“ Oh, was it ? By the way, of course, you must know some of the Kynastons, as they come from your part of the world. I wonder they didn't ask you to the wedding.”

Vera murmured something unintelligible. Monsieur D'Arblet looked at her sharply. He saw that she had in no way recovered her agitation yet, and that she could hardly bear her companion's brainless chatter over this wedding.

“ That has been no ordinary love affair,” said this astute Frenchman to himself. “ I must decidedly cultivate this young lady's acquaintance, for I mean to pay you out well yet, *ma belle Hélène*.”

“ How fortunate it was we happened to be passing just as it was going on. I wouldn't have missed seeing that lovely

lavender satin the bride wore, for worlds ; did you notice the cut of the jacket front, Vera ; it was something new ; she looked as happy as possible too. I daresay her first marriage was a *coup manqué*, they generally are when women marry again."

"Suppose we take these three chairs in the shade," suggested Monsieur D'Arblet, cutting short unceremoniously the string of her remarks, which apparently were no more soothing to himself than to Miss Nevill.

They sat down, and for the space of half an hour Monsieur D'Arblet proceeded to make himself politely agreeable to Miss Nevill, and he succeeded so well in amusing her by his conversation, that by the time they all got up to go, the natural bloom had returned to her cheeks, and she was talking to him quite easily and pleasantly, as though no catastrophe in her life had happened but an hour ago.

“ You will come back with us to lunch, Monsieur D'Arblet ? ”

“ I shall be delighted, madame.”

“ If you will excuse me, Cissy ; I am not going to lunch with you to-day,” said Vera.

“ My dear ! where are you going, then ? ”

“ I have a visit to pay—an engagement, I mean—in—in Cadogan Place. I will be home very soon, in time for your drive, if you don't mind my leaving you.”

“ Oh, of course, do as you like, dear.”

Lucien D'Arblet was annoyed at her defection, but, of course, having accepted Mrs. Hazeldine's invitation, there was nothing for it but to go on with her ; so he swallowed his discomfiture as best he could, and proceeded to make himself agreeable to his hostess.

As to Vera, she turned away and retraced her steps slowly towards St. Paul's Church. It was a foolish romantic fancy, she could not tell what impelled her to it, but she felt

as though she must go back there once more.

The church was not closed. She pushed open the swing-door and went in. It was all hushed and silent and empty. Where so lately the gay throng of well-dressed men and women had passed in and out, chattering, smiling, nodding—displaying their radiant toilettes one against the other, there were only now the dark, empty rows of pews, and the bent figure of one shabbily-dressed old woman gathering together the prayer-books and hymn-books that had been tumbled out of their places in the scuffle, and picking up morsels of torn finery that had dropped about along the nave.

Vera passed by her and went up into the chancel. She stood where Maurice had stood by the altar rails. A soft, subdued light came streaming in through the coloured glass window; a bird was chirping high up

somewhere among the oak rafters of the roof, the roar of the street without was muffled and deadened; the old woman slammed-to the door of a pew, the echo rang with a hollow sound through the empty building, and her departing footsteps shuffled away down the aisle into silence.

Vera lifted her eyes; great tears welled down slowly one by one over her cheeks—burning, blistering tears, such as, thank God, one sheds but once or twice in a lifetime—that seem to rend our very hearts as they rise.

Presently she sank down upon her knees and prayed—prayed for him, that he might be happy and forget her, but most of all for herself, that she might school her rebellious heart to patience, and her wild passion of misery into peace and submission.

And by degrees the tempest within her was hushed. Then, ere she arose from her knees, something lying on the ground, within

a yard of where she knelt, caught her eye. It was a little Russia-leather letter-case. She recognised it instantly ; she had often seen Maurice take it out of his pocket.

She caught at it hungrily and eagerly, as a miser clutches a treasure-trove, pressing it wildly to her bosom, and covering it with passionate kisses. Dear little shabby case, that had been so near his heart ; that his hand, perchance, only an hour ago had touched. Could anything on earth be more priceless to her than this worn and faded object !

It seemed to be quite empty. It had fallen evidently from his pocket during the service. If he ever missed it there was nothing in it to lose, and now it was hers, hers by every right ; she would never part with it, never. It was all she had of him ; the one single thing he had touched which she possessed.

She rose hurriedly. She was in haste now to be gone with her treasure, lest any one should wrest it from her. She carried it down the church with a guilty delight, kissing it more than once as she went. And then, as she opened the church door, some one ran up the steps outside, and she stood face to face with Sir John Kynaston.

CHAPTER II.

THE RUSSIA-LEATHER CASE.

“VERA!”

Sir John Kynaston fell back a step or two and turned very white.

“How do you do?” said Vera, quietly, and put out her hand.

They stood in the open air. There was a carriage passing, some idle cabmen on the stand with nothing to do but to stare at them, a gaping nursery-maid and her charges at the gate. Whatever people may feel on suddenly running against each other after a deadly quarrel, or a heart-rending separation, or after a long interval of heart-burnings and misunderstandings, there are always the externals of life to be observed.

It is difficult to rush into the tragedy of one's existence at a gulp, it is safer to shake hands and to say, "How do you do?"

That is what Vera felt, and that was what these two people did. Sir John took her proffered hand, and responded to her stereotyped greeting. By the time he had done so, he had recovered his presence of mind.

"What an odd thing to meet you at the door of this church," he said, rather nervously. "Do you know that my brother was married here this morning?"

"Yes; I was in the church."

"Were you? How glad I am I did not know it," almost involuntarily.

There was a little pause; then Vera asked him if he was going to Walpole Lodge.

"Eventually; but I have come back here to look for something. My brother has lost a little Russia-leather case; he thinks he may have dropped it in the church; there

were two ten pound notes in it. I am going in to look for it. Why, what is that in your hand? I believe that is the very thing."

"I—I—just picked it up," stammered Vera. She began searching in the pockets of the case. "I did not think there was anything in it. Yes, here are the notes, quite safe."

She took them out and gave them to him. He held out his hand mechanically for the case also.

"Thank you; you have saved me the trouble of looking for it. I will take it back to him at once."

But she could not part with her treasure; it was all she had got of him.

"The letter-case is very shabby," she said, crimsoning with a painful confusion. "I do not think he can want it at all; it is quite worn out."

Sir John looked at her with a slight surprise.

“It can be very little use to him. One likes sometimes to have a little remembrance of those—of people—one has known; he would not mind my keeping it, I think. Tell him—tell him I asked for it.” The tears were very near her voice; she could scarcely keep them back out of her eyes.

John Kynaston dropped his hand, and Vera slipped the little case quickly into her pocket.

“Would you mind walking a little way with me, Vera?” he said, gently and very gravely.

She drew down her veil, and went with him in silence. They had walked halfway down Wilton Crescent before he spoke to her again; then he turned towards her, and looked at her earnestly and sadly,

“Why did you go back again into the church, Vera?”

“I wanted to think quietly a little,” she murmured. There was another pause.

“So *that* is what parted us!” he exclaimed, with a sudden bitterness, at length.

She looked up, startled and pale.

“What do you mean?” she stammered.

“Oh, child! I see it all now. How blind I have been. Ah, why did you not trust me, love? Why did you fear to tell me your secret? Do you not think that I, who would have laid down my life for you to make you happy, do you not suppose I would have striven to make your path smooth for you?”

She could not answer him; the kind words, the tender voice, were too much for her. Her tears fell fast and silently.

“Tell me,” he said, turning to her almost roughly, “tell me the truth. Has he ill-

treated you, this brother of mine, who stole you from me, and then has left you desolate?"

"No, no; do not say that; it was never his fault at all, only mine; and he was always bound to her. He has been everything that is good and loyal and true to you and to her; it has been only a miserable mistake, and now it is over. Yes, thank God, it is over; never speak of it again. He was never false to you; only I was false. But it is ended."

They were walking round Belgrave Square by this time, not near the houses, but round the square garden in the middle. All recollection of his brother's marriage, of the wedding breakfast at Walpole Lodge, of the speech the best man would be expected to make, had gone clean out of his head; he thought of nothing but Vera and of the revelation concerning her that had just come

to him. It was the quiet hour of the day ; there were very few people about ; everybody was indoors eating heavy luncheons, with sun-blinds drawn down to keep out the heat. They were almost as much alone as in a country lane in Meadowshire.

“What are you going to do with yourself?” he said to her presently ; “What use are you going to make of your life?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, drearily ; “I suppose I shall go back to Sutton. Perhaps I shall marry.”

“But not me?”

She looked up at him piteously.

“Listen, child,” he said, eagerly ; “If I were to go away for a year, and then come back to you, how would it be? Oh, my darling! I love you so deeply that I could even be content to do with but half your heart, so that I could win your sweet self. I would exact nothing from you, love, no

more than what you could give me freely. But I would love you so well, and make your life so sweet and pleasant to you, that in time, perhaps, you would forget the old sorrow, and learn to be happy, with a quiet kind of happiness, with me; I would ask for no more. Look, child, I have grieved sorely for you; I have sat down and wept, and mourned for you as though I had no strength or life left in me. But now I am ashamed of my weakness, for it is unworthy of *you*. I am going away, abroad, across the world, I care not where, so long as I can be up and doing, and forget the pain at my heart. Vera, tell me that I may come back to you in a year, Think with what fresh life and courage I should go if I had but that hope before my eyes. In a year's time your pain will be less; you will have forgotten many things; you will be content, perhaps, to come to me, knowing that I will never

reproach you with the past, nor expect more than you can give me in the future. Vera, let me come back and claim you in a year!"

How strange it was that the chance of marrying this man was perpetually being presented to her. Never, perhaps, had the temptation been stronger to her than it was now. He had divined her secret; there would be no concealment between them; he would ask her for no love that it was not in her power to give; he would be content with her as she was, and he would love her, and worship her, and surround her with everything that could make her life pleasant and easy for her. Could a man offer more? Oh! why could she not take him at his word, and give him the hope he craved for?

Alas! for Vera; she had eaten too deeply of the knowledge of good and evil—that worldly wisdom in whose strength she had

started in life's race, and in the possession of which she had once deemed herself so strong—so absolutely invulnerable to the things that pierce and wound weaker woman—this was gone from her. The baser part of her nature, wherewith she would so gladly have been content, was uppermost no longer; her heart had triumphed over her head, and with a woman of strong character, this is generally only done at the expense of her happiness.

To marry Sir John Kynaston, to be lapped in luxury, to receive all the good things of this world at his hands, and all the while to love his brother with a guilty love, this was no longer possible to Vera Nevill.

"I cannot do it; do not ask me," she said, distractedly. "Your goodness to me half breaks my heart; but it cannot be."

"Why not, child? In a year so much may be altered."

"I shall not alter."

"No ; but even so, you might learn to be happy with me."

"It is not that ; you do not understand. I daresay I could be happy enough ; that is not why I cannot marry you."

"Why not, then ?"

"*I dare not*," she said, in a low voice.

He drew in his breath. "Ah !" he said, between his teeth, "is it so bad with you as that ?"

She bent her head in silent assent.

"That is hard," he said, almost to himself, looking gloomily before him. Presently he spoke again. "Thank you, Vera," he said, rather brokenly. "You are a brave woman and a true one. Many would have taken my all, and given me back only deception and falseness. But you are incapable of that, and—and you fear your own strength ; is that it ?"

“ Whilst he lives,” she said, with a sudden burst of passion, “ I can know no safety. Never to see his face again can be my only safeguard, and with you I could never be safe. Why even to bear your name would be to scorch my heart every time I was addressed by it. Forgive me, John,” turning to him with a sudden penitence, “ I should not have pained you by saying these things ; you, who have been so infinitely good to me. Go your way across the world, and forget me. Ah ! have I not been a curse to everyone who bears the name of Kynaston ? ”

He was silent from very pity. Vera was no longer to him the goddess of his imagination ; the one pure and peerless woman, above all other women, such as he had once fancied her to be. But surely she was dearer to him now, in all her weakness and her suffering, than she had ever been on that

lofty pedestal of perfection upon which he had once lifted her.

He pitied her so much, and yet he could not help her ; her malady was past remedy. And, as she had told him, it was no one's fault—it was only a miserable mistake. He had never had her heart—he saw it plainly now. Many little things in the past, which he had scarcely remembered at the time, came back to his memory,—little details of that week at Shadonake, when Maurice had lived in the same house with her, whilst he had only gone over daily to see her. Always, in those days, Maurice had been by her side, and Vera had been dreamily happy with that fixed look of content, with which the presence of the man she loves best, beautifies and poetises a woman's face. Sir John was not a very observant man ; but now, after it was all over, these things came back to him. The night of the ball,

Mrs. Romer's mysterious hints, and his own vague disquietude at her words ; later on, Maurice's reasonless refusal to be present at his wedding, and Vera's startled face of dismay, when he had asked her to go and plead with him to stay for it.

They had struggled against their hearts, it was clear ; these poor lovers, whose lives were both tied up and bound before ever they had met each other. But nature had been too strong for them ; and the woman, at least, had torn herself free from the chains that had become insupportable to her.

They walked on silently, side by side, round the square. Some school-girls were playing at lawn-tennis within the garden. There was an occasional shout or a ringing laugh from their fresh young voices. A footman was walking along the pavement opposite, with two fat pugs, and a white

Spitz, in the last stage of obesity, in tow, which it was his melancholy duty to promenade daily up and down, for their mid-day airing. An occasional hansom dashing quickly by, broke the stillness of the "empty" hour. Years and years afterwards every detail of the scene came back to his memory with the distinctness of a photograph, when he passed once more through the square.

"You have been no curse to me, Vera," he said, presently, breaking the silence. "Do not reproach yourself; it is I who was a madman to deem that I could win your love. Child, we are both sufferers, but time heals most things, and we must learn to wait and be patient. Will you ever marry, Vera?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I may be obliged to. It might be better for me. I cannot say. Don't speak of it. Why, is

there nothing else for a woman to do but to marry? John, it must be late. Ought you not to go back—to—to your mother's?"

Insensibly, she resumed a lighter manner. On that other subject there was nothing left to be said. She had had her last chance of becoming John Kynaston's wife. After what she had said to him, she knew he would never ask her again. That chapter in her life was closed for ever.

They parted unromantically enough in front of St. George's Hospital. He called a hansom for her, and stood holding her hand, one moment longer, possibly, than was strictly necessary, looking intently into her face as he did so.

"Will you think of me, sometimes?"

"Yes, surely."

"Good-bye, Vera."

"Good-bye, John—God bless you, wherever you may go."

She got into her hansom, and he told the cabman where to drive her; then he lifted his hat to her with grave politeness, and walked away in the opposite direction. It was a common-place enough parting, and yet these two never saw each other's faces again in this world.

So it is with our lives. Some one or other who has been a part of our very existence for a space, goes his way one day, and we see him no more. For a little while our hearts ache, and we shed tears in secret for him who is gone, but, by-and-by, we get to understand that he is part of our past, never to be recalled, and after a while we get used to his absence; we think of him less and less, and the death of him, who was once bound up in our very lives, strikes us only with a mild surprise, hardly even tinged with a passing melancholy.

“Poor old so-and-so, he is dead,” we

say. "What a time it is since we met," and then we go our way and think of him no more.

But Vera knew that, in all human probability, she would never see him again ; this man, who had once so nearly been her husband. It was another link of her past life severed. It saddened her, but she knew it was inevitable.

The little letter-case, at all events, was safely hers ; and for many a night Vera slept with it under her pillow.

CHAPTER III.

DINNER AT THE ORLEANS CLUB.

It was the fag end of the London season ; people were talking about Goodwood and the Ryde week, about grouse and about salmon-fishing. Members of Parliament went about, like martyrs at the stake, groaning over the interminable nature of every debate, and shaking their heads over the prospect of getting away. Women in society knew all their own and their neighbours' dresses by heart, and were dead sick of them all ; and even the very gossip and scandal that is always afloat to keep up the spirits of the idlers and the chatterers, had lost all the zest, all the charm of novelty that gave flavour and piquancy to every

canard that was started two months ago.

It was all stale, flat, and unprofitable.

What was the use of constantly asserting, on the very best authority, that lady so-and-so was on the eve of running away with that handsome young actor, whose eyes had taken the female population by storm, when lady so-and-so persisted in walking about arm-in-arm with her husband day after day, with a child on either side of them, in the most provoking way, as though to prove the utter fallacy of the report, and her own incontestable domestic felicity? Or, what merit had a man any longer who had stated in May, that the heiress *par excellence* of the season was about to sell herself and her gold to that debauched and drunken marquis, who had evidently not six months of life left him in which to enjoy his bargain, when the heiress her-

self gave the lie to the *on dit* in July, by talking calmly about going to Norway with her papa, for a month's retirement and rest, after the fatigues of the season ?

What a number of lies are there not propounded during the months of May and June by the inventive Londoner, and how many of them are there not proved to be so, during the latter end of July !

Heaven only knows how, and where, the voice of scandal is first raised. Is it at the five o'clock tea tables ? Or is it in the smoking-rooms of the clubs, that things are first spoken of, and the noxious breath of slander started upon its career ? Or are there evil-minded persons, both men and women, prowling about, like unclean animals, at the skirts of that society into whose inner recesses they would fain gain admittance, picking up greedily, here and there, in their eaves-dropping career, some scrap or

morsel of truth, out of which they weave a well-varnished tale, wherewith to delight the ears of the vulgar and the coarse-minded? There are such men and such women; God forgive them for their wickedness!

Do any of these scandal-mongers ever call to mind, I wonder, an ancient and, seemingly, a well-nigh forgotten injunction?

“Thou shalt not bear false witness,” said the same Voice who has also said, “Thou shalt do no murder.”

And which is the worst—to kill a man’s body, or to slay a man’s honour or a woman’s reputation?

In truth, there seems to me to be but little difference between the two; and the man or the woman who will do the one, might very possibly be guilty of the other—but for the hanging!

We should all do a great many more

wicked things than we do, if there were no consequences.

It is a very trite observation, which is, nevertheless, never spoken with more justice, or more truth, than at or about Hyde Park Corner between May and July, that the world we live in is a very wicked one.

Well, the season, as I have said, was well-nigh over, and all the scandal had run dry, and the gossip for the most part been proved to be incorrect, and there was nobody in all London who excited so much irritation among the talkers as the new beauty, Vera Nevill.

For Vera was Miss Nevill still, and there was every prospect of her remaining so. What on earth possessed the girl that she would not marry? Had not men dangled at her elbow all the season? Could she not have had such and such elder sons, or such and such wealthy commoner? What

was she waiting for? A girl without a penny, who came nobody knew from where, ushered in under Mrs. Hazeldine's wings, with not a decent connection in the world to her name! What did she want—this girl who had only her beauty to depend upon? and everybody knows how fleeting *that* is!

And then, presently, the women who were envious of her began to whisper amongst themselves. There was something against her; she was not what she seemed to be. The men flirted, of course—men will always flirt! but they were careful not to commit themselves! And even that mysterious word “adventuress,” which has an ugly sound, but of which no one exactly knows the precise meaning, began to be bruited about.

“There was an unpleasant story about her, somebody told me once,” said one prettily dressed nonentity to another, as

they wandered slowly up and down the velvet lawns of the Orleans Club. "She was mixed up in some way with the Kynaston family. Sir John was to have married her, and then something dreadful came out, and he threw her over."

"Oh, I thought she jilted him."

"I daresay it was one or the other; at all events, there was some fracas or other. I believe her mother was—hum, hum—you understand—she couldn't be swallowed by the Kynastons at any price; they must have been thankful to get out of it."

"It looks very bad, her not marrying anyone, with all the fuss there has been made over her."

"Yes; even Cissy Hazeldine told me in confidence yesterday, she could not try her again next season. It wouldn't do, you know; it would look too much as if she had some object of her own in getting her

married. Cissy must find something else for another year. Of course, with a husband, she could sail her own course and make her own way; but a girl can't go on attracting attention with impunity—she gets herself talked about—it is only we married women can do as we like.”

“Exactly. Do you suppose *that* will come to anything?” casting a glance towards the further end of the lawn, where Vera Nevill sat in a low basket-chair, under the shadow of a spreading tulip-tree, whilst a slight boyish figure, stretched at her feet, alternately chewed blades of grass and looked up worshipingly into her face.

“*That!*” following the direction of her companion's eyes. “Oh dear, no! Denis Wilde is too wide awake to be caught, though he is such a boy! They say she is crazy to get him; everybody else has slipped through her fingers, you see, and he would be better

than nothing. Now we are in the last week in July, I daresay she is getting desperate; but young Wilde knows pretty well what he is about, I expect!"

"He seems to admire her."

"Oh, yes, I daresay; those large kind of women do get admired; men look upon them as fine animals. *I* should not care to be admired in that way, would you?"

"No, indeed! it is disgusting," replied the other, who was fain to conceal the bony corners of her angular figure with a multiplicity of lace ruchings and puffings.

"As to Miss Nevill, she is nothing else. A most material type; why, her waist must be twenty-two inches round!"

"Quite that, dear," with sweetness, from the owner of a nineteen-inch article, which two maids struggled with daily in order to reduce it to the required measurement.

“Well, I never could—between you and me—see much to admire in her.”

“Neither could I, although of course it has been the fashion to rave over her.”

And with that, these two amiable young women fell at it tooth and nail, and proceeded to cry down their victim's personal appearance in the most unmeasured and sweeping terms.

After the taking away of a fellow-woman's character, comes as a natural sequence the condemnation of her face and figure, and it is doubtful which indictment is the most grave in eyes feminine. Meanwhile, the object of all this animadversion sat tranquilly unconscious under her tulip tree, whilst Denis Wilde, that astute young gentleman, whom they had declared to be too well aware of what he was about to be entrapped into matrimony, was engaged in proposing to her for the fourth time.

"I thought we had settled this subject long ago, Mr. Wilde," says Vera, tranquilly unfolding her large, black, feather fan—for it is hot—and slowly folding it up again.

"It will never be settled] for me, Vera ; never, so long as you are unmarried."

"What a dreadful mistake life is !" sighs Vera wearily, more to herself than to the boy at her feet. Was anybody ever happy in this world ? she began to wonder.

"I know very well," resumed Denis Wilde, "that I am not good enough for you ; but then, who is ? My prospects, such as they are, are very distant, and your friends, I daresay, expect you to marry well."

"How often must I tell you that that has nothing to do with it," cries Vera, impatiently. "If I loved a beggar I should marry him !"

Young Wilde plucked at the grass again, and chewed a daisy up almost viciously.

There was a supreme selfishness in the way she had of perpetually harping upon her lack of love for him.

"There is always some fellow or other hanging about you," grumbles the young man irritably ; "you are an inveterate flirt !"

"No woman is worthy of the name who is not !" retorts Vera, laughing.

"I *hate* a flirt," angrily.

"This is very amusing, when you know that your flirtation with Mrs. Hazeldine is a chronic disease of two years' standing !"

"Pooh !—mere child's play on both sides, and you know it is ! You are very different ; you lead a fellow on till he doesn't know whether his very soul is his own, and then you turn round and snap your fingers in his face and send him to the devil."

"What an awful accusation ! Pray give me an instance of a victim to this shocking conduct."

“ Why, there’s that wretched little Frenchman whom you are playing the same game with that you have already done with me ; he follows you like a shadow.”

“ Poor Monsieur D’Arblet ! ” laughed Vera, and then grew suddenly serious. “ But do you know, Mr. Wilde, it is a very singular thing about that man—I can’t think why he follows me about so.”

“ *Can’t* you ! ” very grimly.

“ I assure you the man is no more in love with me than—than—”

“ *I* am ! I suppose you will say next.”

“ Oh dear, no, you are utterly incorrigible and quite in earnest ; but Monsieur D’Arblet is *pretending* to be in love with me.”

“ He makes a very good pretence of it, at all events. Here he comes, confound him ! If I had known Mrs. Hazeldine had asked *him* I would never have come.”

At which Vera, who had heard these out-

bursts of indignant jealousy before, and knew how little poor Denis meant the terrible threats he uttered, only laughed with the pitiless amusement of a woman who knows her own power.

Lucien D'Arblet came towards her smiling, and sank down into a vacant basket-chair by her side, with the air of a man who knows himself to be welcome.

He had been paying a great deal of attention latterly to the beautiful Miss Nevill ; he had followed her about everywhere, and had made it patent in every public place where he had met her, that she alone was the sole aim and object of his thoughts. And yet with it all, Monsieur Le Vicomte was only playing a part, and not only that, but he was pretty certain that she knew it to be so. He gazed rapturously into her beautiful face, he lowered his voice tenderly in speaking to her, he pressed her hand when she

gave it to him, and even on occasions he raised it furtively to his lips ; but, with all this, he knew perfectly well that she was not one whit deceived by him. She no more believed him to be in love with her than he believed it of himself. She was clever and beautiful, and he admired and even liked her, but in the beginning of their acquaintance Monsieur D'Arblet had had no thought of making her the object of any sentimental attentions. He had been driven to it by a discovery that he had made concerning her character.

Miss Nevill had a good heart. She was no enraged, injured woman, thirsting for revenge upon the woman who had stolen her lover from her—such as he had desired to find in her ; she was only a true-hearted and unhappy girl, who was not in any case likely to develop into the instrument of vengeance which he sought for.

It was a disappointment to him, but he was not completely disheartened. It was through her that he desired to punish Helen for daring to brave him, and he swore to himself that he would do it still; only he must now set about it in a different way. So he began to make love to Miss Nevill.

And Vera was shrewd enough to perceive that he was only playing a part. Nevertheless, there were times when she felt so completely puzzled by his persistent adoration, that she could hardly tell what to make of it. Was he trying to make some other woman jealous? It even came into her head, once or twice, to suspect that Cissy Hazeldine was the real object of his devotion, so utterly incomprehensible did his conduct appear to her.

If she had been told that Lucien D'Arblet's real quest was not love but revenge, she

would have laughed. An Englishman does not spend his time nor his energies in plotting a desperate retaliation on a lady who has disregarded his threats and evaded his persecution ; it is not in the nature of any Briton, however irascible, to do so, but a Frenchman is differently constituted. There is something delightfully refreshing to him in an atmosphere of plotting and intrigue. There is the same instinct of the chase in both nationalities, but it is more amusing to the Frenchman to hunt down his fellow creatures than to pursue unhappy little beasts of the field ; and he understands himself in the pursuit of the larger game infinitely better.

Nevertheless, Monsieur D'Arblet had no intention of getting himself into trouble, nor of risking the just fury of an indignant British husband, who stood six feet in his stockings, nor did he desire, by any anony-

mous libel, to bring himself in any way under the arm of the law. All he meant to do was to dig his trench and to lay his mine, to place the fuse in Vera Nevill's hands—leave her to set fire to it—and then retire himself, covered with satisfaction at his cleverness, to his own side of the channel.

Who could possibly grudge him so harmless an entertainment ?

Monsieur D'Arblet, as he sat down by her side under the tulip-tree, began by paying Miss Nevill a prettily turned compliment upon her fresh white toilette ; as he did so, Vera smiled and bent her head ; she had seen him before to-day.

“ Fine evening, Mr. Wilde,” said the Frenchman, turning civilly, but with no evident *empressement*, towards the gentleman he addressed.

Denis only answered by a sulky grunt.

Then began that process between the two

men, which is known in polite society as the endeavour to sit each other out.

Monsieur D'Arblet discoursed upon the weather, and the beauty of the gardens, with long and expressive pauses between each insignificant remark, and the air of a man who wishes to say, "I could talk about much more interesting things if that other fellow was out of the way."

Denis Wilde simply reversed himself, that is to say, he lay on his back instead of his face, stared up at the sky, and chewed grass perseveringly. He had evidently no intention of being driven off the field.

"I had something of great importance to say to you this evening," murmured Monsieur D'Arblet at length, looking fixedly at his enemy's up-turned face.

"All right, go a-head, don't mind me," says the young gentleman, amiably. "I'm never in the way, am I, Miss Nevill?"

"Never, Mr. Wilde," answers Vera, sweetly. Like a true woman, she quite appreciates the fun of the situation, and thoroughly enjoys it; "pray tell me what you have to say, monsieur."

"Ah! Ces choses-là ne se disent qu'à deux!" murmurs the Frenchman, with a sentimental sigh.

"It is no use your saying it in French," says Denis, with a chuckle, twisting himself round again upon his chest, "because I have the good fortune, D'Arblet, to understand your charming language like a native, absolutely like a native."

"You have a useful proverb in English, which says, that two is company and three is none," retorts D'Arblet, with a smile.

"I'm awfully sorry, old fellow, but I am so exceedingly comfortable, I really can't get up; if I could oblige you in any other way I certainly would."

"Come to dinner!" cries out Mrs. Hazeldine, coming towards them, from the garden side of the lawn; "we are all here now."

The two men sprang simultaneously to their feet. This is, of course, the moment that they have both been waiting for. Each offers an arm to Miss Nevill; Monsieur D'Arblet bends blandly and smilingly forward; Denis Wilde has a thunder-cloud upon his face, and holds out his arm as though he were ready to knock somebody down with it.

"What am I to do?" cries Vera, laughing, and looking with feigned indecision from one to the other.

"Make haste and decide, my dear," says Mrs. Hazeldine; "for, whichever of you two gentlemen does *not* take in Miss Nevill, must go and take that eldest Miss Frampton for me."

The eldest Miss Frampton is thirty-five if she is a day ; she is large and bony, much given to beads and bangles, and to talking about the military men she has known, and whom she usually calls by their surnames alone, like a man. She goes familiarly amongst her acquaintance by the name of the Dragoon.

A cold shiver passes visibly down Mr. Wilde's back ; unfortunately Miss Nevill perceives it, and makes up her mind instantly.

"I would not deprive you of so charming a companion," she says, smiling sweetly at him, and passes her arm through that of the French vicomte.

At dinner, poor Denis Wilde curses Monsieur D'Arblet, Miss Frampton, and his own fate, indiscriminately and ineffectually. He is sitting exactly opposite to his divinity, but he cannot even enjoy the felicity of staring at her, for Miss Frampton will not

let him alone. She chatters unceasingly and gushingly. At an early period of the repast, the string of her amber-bead necklace suddenly gives way with a snap. The beads trickle slowly down, one by one ; half a dozen of them drop with a cracking noise, like little marbles, upon the polished floor, where there is a general scramble of waiters and gentlemen under the table together after them ; two fall into her own soup, three more on to Denis Wilde's table-napkin ; as fast as the truants are picked up, others are shed down in their wake from the four apparently inexhaustible rows that garnish her neck.

Miss Frampton bears it all with serene and smiling good temper.

“ Dear me, I am really very sorry to give so much trouble. It doesn't signify in the least, Mr. Wilde—thanks, that is one more. Oh, there goes another into the sweetbreads ; but I really don't mind if they are lost.

Jameson, of the 17th, gave them to me. Do you know Jameson? cousin of Jameson in the 9th; he brought them from Italy, or Turkey, or somewhere. I am sure I don't remember where amber comes from; do you, Mr. Wilde?"

Mr. Wilde, if he is vague as to where it comes from, is quite decided as to where he would desire it to go. At this moment he has crunched a tender tooth down upon one of these infernal beads, having helped himself to it unconsciously out of the sweet-bread dish.

Is he doomed to swallow amber beads for the remainder of the repast? he asks himself.

"Did you ever meet Archdale, the man who was in the 16th?" continues Miss Frampton, glibly, unconscious of his agonies; "he exchanged afterwards into the 4th—he is such a nice fellow. I lunched every day at Ascot this year on the 16th's drag. The

first day, I met Lester—that's the major, you know—and Lester is *such* a pet! He told me to come every day to lunch, and bring any of my friends with me; so of course I did, and there wasn't a better lunch on the course; and, on the cup-day, Archdale came up and talked to me—he abused the champagne-cup though; he said there was more soda-water than champagne in it—the more he drank of it the more dreadfully sober he got. However, I am invited to lunch with the 4th at Goodwood, they are going to have a spread under the trees, so I shall be able to compare notes about the champagne-cup. I know two other men in the 4th, Hopkins and Lambert; do you know them?" and so on, until pretty well half the army list, and all the luncheon-giving regiments in the service, had been passed under review.

And there, straight opposite to him, was

Vera, laughing at his discomfiture, he was sure, but also listening to the flattering rubbish which that odious little Frenchman was pouring into her ears.

Did ever young man sit through such a detestable and abominable repast ?

If Denis Wilde had been rash enough to nourish insane hopes with regard to moonlight wanderings in the pleasant old gardens after dinner, these hopes were destined to be blighted.

They were a party of twelve ; the waiting was bad and the courses numerous ; the dinner was a lengthy affair altogether. By the time it was over, and coffee had been discussed on the terrace outside the house, the carriages came round to the door, and the ladies of the party voted that it was time to go home.

Soon everybody stood clothed in summer ulsters or white dust-cloaks, waiting in the

hall. The coach started from the door with much noise and confusion, with a good deal of plunging from the leaders, and some jibbing from the wheelers, accompanied by a very feeble performance on that much-abused instrument, the horn, by an amateur who occupied a back seat ; and after it had departed, a humble train of neat broughams and victorias came trooping up in its wake.

“You will see,” said nonentity number one, in her friend’s ear ; “you will see that Nevill girl will go back in some man’s brougham—that is what she has been waiting for ; otherwise, she would have perched herself up on the box-seat of the coach, in the most conspicuous place she could find.”

“What a disgraceful creature she must be !” is the indignantly virtuous reply.

The “Nevill girl,” however, disappointed

the expectations of both these charitable ladies, by quietly taking her place in Mrs. Hazeldine's brougham, by her friend's side, amid a shower of "Good-nights" from the remainder of the party.

"Ah!" said the nonentity, with a vicious gasp, "you may be sure she has some disreputable supper of men, and cigars, and brandies and sodas, waiting for her up in town, or she would never go off so meekly as that in Mrs. Hazeldine's brougham. Still waters run deep, my dear!"

"She is a horrid, disreputable girl, I am quite sure of that," is the answer. "I am very thankful, indeed, that I haven't the misfortune of knowing her."

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. HAZELDINE'S "LONG ELIZA."

THE scene is Mrs. Hazeldine's drawing-room, in Park Lane, the hour is four o'clock in the afternoon, and the *dramatis personæ* are Miss Nevill, very red in the face, standing in a corner, behind an oblong velvet table covered with china ornaments, and Monsieur Le Vicomte D'Arblet, also red in the face, gesticulating violently on the further side of it.

Miss Nevill, having retired behind the oblong table, purely from prudential motives of personal safety, is devoured with anxiety concerning the too imminent fate of her hostess' china. There is a little Lowestoft tea-service that was picked up only last

week at Christie and Manson's, a turquoise blue crackle jar that is supposed to be priceless, and a pair of "Long Eliza" vases, which her hostess loves as much as she does her toy terrier, and far better than she loves her husband.

What will become of her, Vera Nevill, if Mrs. Hazeldine comes in presently and finds these treasures lying in a thousand pieces upon the floor? And yet this is what she is looking forward to, as only too probable a catastrophe.

Vera feels much as must have felt the owner of the proverbial bull in the crockery shop—terror, mingled with an overpowering sense of responsibility. All personal considerations are well-nigh merged in the realisation of the danger which menaces her hostess' property.

"Monsieur D'Arblet, I must implore you to calm yourself," she says, desperately.

"And how, mademoiselle, I ask you, am I to be calm, when you speak of shattering the hopes of my life?" cries the vicomte, who is dancing about frantically backwards and forwards, in a clear space of three square yards, between the different pieces of furniture by which he is surrounded, all equally fragile, and equally loaded with destructible objects.

"*Pray* be careful, Monsieur D'Arblet, your sleeve nearly caught then in the handle of that Chelsea basket," cries Vera, in anguish.

"And what to me are Chelsea baskets, or china, or trash of that kind, when you, cruel one, are determined to scorn me?"

"Oh, if you would only come outside and have it out on the staircase," murmurs Vera, piteously.

"No, I will never leave this room, never, mademoiselle, until you give me hope; never will I cease to importune you until your

heart relents towards the *misérable* who adores you !”

Here Monsieur D'Arblet made an attempt to get at his charmer by coming round the end of the velvet table.

Vera felt distracted. To allow him to execute his manœuvre, was to run the chance of being clasped in his arms ; to struggle to get free was the almost certainty of upsetting the table.

She cast a despairing glance across the room at the bell-handle, which was utterly beyond her reach. There was no hope in that direction. Apparently, moral persuasion was her only chance.

“ Monsieur D'Arblet, I *forbid* you to advance a step nearer to me !”

He fell back, with a profound sigh.

“ Mademoiselle, I love you to distraction. I am unable to disobey your commands.”

"Very well, then, listen to me. I cannot understand this violent outburst of emotion. You have done me the honour to propose to marry me, and I have, with many thanks for your most flattering distinction, declined your offer. Surely, between a lady and a gentleman, there can be nothing further to say; it is not incumbent upon you to persecute me in this fashion."

"Miss Nevill, you have treated me with a terrible cruelty. You have encouraged my ardent passion for you until you did lift me up to Heaven." Here Monsieur D'Arblet stretched up both his arms with a suddenness which endangered the branches of the tall Dresden candelabra on the high mantelpiece behind him, "After which you do reject me and cast me down to hell!" and down came both hands heavily upon the velvet table between them. The blue crackle jar, the two "Long Eliza" vases, and

all the Lowestoft cups and saucers, literally jumped upon their foundations.

"For Heaven's sake!" cried Vera.

"Ah!" in a tone of deep reproach, "do not plead with me, mademoiselle; you have broken my heart."

"And you have nearly broken the china," murmured Vera.

"What is this miserable china that you talk about, in comparison with my happiness?" and the vicomte made as though he would tear his hair out with both hands.

The comedy of the situation began to be too much for Vera's self-control; another ten minutes of it, and she felt that she should become hysterical; all the more so, because she knew very well that the whole thing was nothing but a piece of acting; with what object, however, she was at a loss to imagine.

"For goodness sake, do be reasonable,

Monsieur D'Arblet ; you know perfectly well that I have never encouraged you, as you call it, for the very good reason that there has never been anything to encourage. We have been very good friends, but never anything more."

"Mademoiselle, you do me injustice."

"On the contrary, I give you credit for a great deal more common sense, as a rule, than you seem disposed to evince to-day. I am quite certain that you have never entertained any warmer feeling towards me than friendship."

This was an injudicious statement. Monsieur D'Arblet felt that his reputation as a *galant homme*, and an adorer of the fair sex was impugned ; he instantly flew into the most violent passion, and jumped about amongst the gipsy tables and the *étagères*, and the dainty little spindle-legged cabinets more vehemently than ever.

"I, not love you! Lucien D'Arblet profess a sentiment which he does not experience! *Ah! par exemple, Mademoiselle, c'est trop fort!* Next you will say that I am a *menteur*, a *fripon*, a *lâche*! You will tell me that I have no honour, and no sense of the generosity due to a woman; that I am a brute and an imbecile" and at every epithet he dashed his hands violently out in front of him, or thrust them wildly through his disordered locks. The whole room shook, every ornament on every table shivered with the strength of his agitation.

"Oh, I will say any single thing you like," cried Vera, "if only you will keep still—"

"Do not insult me by denying my affection!"

"I will deny nothing," said poor Vera, at her wits ends. "If what I have said has pained you, I am sincerely sorry for it, but

for Heaven's sake control yourself, and—
and—*do* go away!"

Then Monsieur D'Arblet stood still and looked at her fixedly and mournfully; his hands had dropped feebly by his side, there was an air of profound melancholy in his aspect; he regarded her with a searching intensity. He was asking himself whether his agitation and his despair had produced the very slightest effect upon her; and he came to the conclusion they had not.

"*Peste soit de cette femme!*" he said to himself. "She is the first I ever came across who refused to believe in vows of eternal love. As a rule, women never fail to give them credit, if they are spoken often enough, and shouted out loud enough; the more one despairs and declares that one is about to expire, the more the dear creatures are impressed, and the more firmly they are convinced of the power of their own charms.

But this woman does not believe in me one little bit. Love, despair, rage—it is all the same to her—I might as well talk to the winds! She only wants to get rid of me before her friend comes in, and before I break her accursed china. Ah! it is these miserable little pots and jugs that she is thinking about! Very well then, it is by them that I will do what I want. A great genius can bend to small things, as well as soar to large ones—Voyons donc, ma belle, which of us will be the victor!”

All this time he was gazing at her fixedly and dejectedly.

“Miss Nevill,” he said, gloomily, “I will accept your rejection; to-morrow, I will say good-bye to this country, for ever!”

“We are all going away this week,” said Vera, cheerfully; “this is the end of July. You will come back again next year, and enjoy your season as much as ever.”

"Never—never. Lucien D'Arblet will visit this country no more. The words that I am about to speak to you now—the request that I am about to make of you—are like the words of a dying man; like the parting desire of one who expires. Mademoiselle, I have a request to make of you."

"I am sure," began Vera, politely, "if there is anything I can do for you—" she breathed more freely now he talked about going away and dying; it would be much better that he should so go away, and so die, than remain interminably on the rampage in Mrs. Hazeldine's drawing-room. Vera had stood siege for close upon an hour. The moment of her deliverance was apparently drawing near; in the hour of victory she felt that she could afford to be generous; any little thing that he liked to ask of her she would be glad enough to do, with a view to expediting his departure. Perhaps he wanted

her photograph, or a lock of her hair ; to either he would be perfectly welcome.

"There is something, I am forced to go away from England without having done ; a solemn duty I have to leave unperformed. Miss Nevill, will you undertake to do it for me ? "

"Really, Monsieur D'Arblet, you are very mysterious ; it depends, of course, upon what this duty is—if it is very difficult, or very unpleasant."

"It is neither difficult nor unpleasant. It is only to give a small parcel to a gentleman, who is not now in England ; to give it him yourself, with your own hands."

"That does not sound difficult, certainly," said Vera, smiling ; after all, she was glad he had not asked for a photograph or a lock of hair ; "but how am I to find this friend of yours ? "

"Miss Nevill, do you know a man called

Kynaston? Captain Maurice Kynaston?" He was watching her keenly now.

Vera turned suddenly very white; then controlling herself with an effort, she answered quietly.

"Yes, I know him. Why?"

"Because, that is the man I want you to give my parcel to." He drew something out of his breast-coat pocket, and handed it to her across the oblong table that was still between them. She took it in her hands, and turned it over doubtfully and uneasily. It was a small square parcel, done up in brown paper, fastened round with string, and sealed at both ends.

It might have been a small book; it probably was. She had no reason to give why she should not do his commission for him, and yet she felt a strange and unaccountable reluctance to undertake it.

"I had very much rather that you asked

somebody else to do this for you, Monsieur D'Arblet," she said, handing the packet back to him. He did not attempt to take it from her.

"It concerns the most sacred emotions of my heart, mademoiselle," he said, sensationally. "I could not entrust it to an indifferent person. You, who have plunged me into such an abyss of despair by your cruel rejection of my affection, cannot surely refuse to do so small a thing for me."

Miss Nevill was again looking at the small parcel in her hands.

"Will it hurt or injure Captain Kynaston in any way?" she asked.

"Far from it; it will probably be of great service to him. Come, Miss Nevill, promise me that you will give it to him; any time will do before the end of the year, any time that you happen to see him, or to be near enough to visit him; I only want

to be sure that it reaches him. All you have to do is to give it him into his hands when no one else is near. After all, it is a very small favour I ask you."

"And it is precisely because it is so small, Monsieur D'Arblet," said Vera, decidedly, "that I cannot imagine why you should make such a point of a trifle like this; and, as I don't like being mixed up in things I don't understand, I must, I think, decline to have anything to do with it."

"*Allons donc!*" said the vicomte to himself. "I am reduced to the china."

He took an excited turn up and down the room, then came back again to where she stood.

"Miss Nevill!" he cried, with rising anger, "you seem determined to wound my feelings, and to insult my self-respect. You reject my offers, you sneer at my professions of affection; and now you appear to

me to throw sinister doubts upon the meaning of the small thing I have asked you to do for me." At each of these accusations, he waved his arm up and down to emphasize his remarks ; and now, as if unconsciously, his hand suddenly fell upon the neck of one of the " Long Eliza " vases on the table before him. He lifted it up in the air.

" For Heaven's sake, Monsieur D'Arblet, take care—please put down that vase," cried Vera, suddenly returning to her former terrors.

He looked at the object in his hand, as though it were utterly beneath consideration.

" Vase ! what is a vase, I ask ? Do you not suppose, before relinquishing what I ask of you, I would dash a hundred vases such as this into ten thousand fragments to the earth ? " He raised his arm above his head, as though on the point of carrying his threat into execution.

Vera uttered a scream.

"Good gracious! What on earth are you doing? It is Mrs. Hazeldine's favourite piece of china; she values it more than anything she has got. If you were to break it she would go half out of her mind."

"Never mind this wretched vase. Answer me, Mademoiselle Nevill, will you give that parcel to Captain Kynaston?"

"I am not at all likely to meet him; I assure you nothing is so improbable. I know him very little. Ah! what are you doing?"

The infuriated Frenchman was whirling the blue-and-white treasure madly round in the air.

"You are then determined to humiliate and to insult me; and to prove to you how great is my just indignation, I will dash—"

"No, no, no!" cried Vera, frantically; "for Heaven's sake do not be so mad. Mrs.

Hazeldine will never forgive me. Put it down, I entreat you. Yes, yes, I will promise anything you like. I am sure I have no wish to insult you."

"Ah, then, you will give that to him?" He paused with the vase still uplifted, looking at her.

Vera felt convinced by this time that she had to do with a raving lunatic. After all, was it not better to do this small thing for him, and to get rid of him. She knew that, sooner or later, down at Sutton or up in London, she and Maurice were likely to meet. It would not be much trouble to her to place the small parcel in his hands. Surely, to deliver herself from this man—to save Cissy's beloved china, and, perchance, her own throat—for what might he not take a fancy to next!—from the clutches of this madman, it would be easier to do what he wanted.

"Yes, I will give it to him. I promise you, if you will only put that vase down and go away."

"You will promise me faithfully?"

"Faithfully."

"On your word of honour, and as you hope for salvation?"

"Yes, yes. There is no need for oaths; if I have promised, I will do it."

"Very well." He placed the vase back upon the table and walked to the door. "Mademoiselle," he said, making her a low bow, "I am infinitely obliged to you;" and then, without another word, he opened the door and was gone.

Three minutes later Mrs. Hazeldine came in. She was just back from her drive. She found Vera lying back exhausted and breathless in an arm-chair.

"My dear, what have you done to Monsieur D'Arblet? I met him running

out of the house like a madman, and laughing to himself like a little fiend. He nearly knocked me down. What has happened? Have you accepted him?"

"No, I have refused him," gasped Vera; "but, thank God, I have saved your 'Long Eliza,' Cissy!"

Early the following morning one of Mrs. Hazeldine's servants was despatched in a hansom with a small brown paper parcel and a note to the Charing Cross Hotel.

During the night watches Miss Nevill had been seized with misgivings concerning the mysterious mission wherewith she had been charged.

But the servant, the parcel, and the note all returned together just as they had been sent.

"Monsieur D'Arblet has left town, Miss; he went by the tidal train last night on his

way to the Continent, and has left no address."

So Vera tore up her own note, and locked up the offending parcel in her dressing-case.

CHAPTER V.

A WEDDING TOUR.

WE all know that weddings are as old as the world, but who is it that invented wedding tours? Owing to what delusion were they first instituted?

For a wedding feast there is a reasonable cause, just as there is for a funeral luncheon, or a christening dinner. There has been in each instance a trying ordeal to be gone through in a public church. It is quite right that there should be eating and drinking, and a certain amount of jollification afterwards amongst the unoffending guests who have been dragged in as spectators on the occasion. But why on earth, when the day is over, cannot the unhappy couple be left

alone to eat a Darby-and-Joan dinner together in the house in which they propose to live, and return peacefully on the morrow to the avocation of their daily lives? Why must they be sent off amid a shower of rice and shabby satin shoes into an enforced banishment from the society of their fellow creatures, and so thrown upon each other that in nine cases out of ten, for want of something better to do, they have learnt the way to quarrel, tooth and nail, before the week is out?

I believe that a great many marriages, that are as likely as not to turn out in the end very happily, are utterly prevented from doing so by that pernicious and utterly childish custom of keeping up the season known as the honeymoon. "Honey," by the way, is very sweet, doubtless, but there is nothing on earth which sensible people get sooner tired of. Three days of an

exclusively saccharine diet is about as much as any grown man and woman can be reasonably expected to stand; after that period there come upon the jaded appetite unlawful longings after strong meats and anchovies, after turtle-soup and devilled bones, such as no sugar-fed couple has the poetic right to indulge in. Nevertheless, like a snake in the grass, the insidious desire will creep into the soul of one or other of the two. There will be, doubtless, a noble struggle to stifle the treacherous thought; a vigorous effort to bring back the wandering mind into the path of duty; a conscientious effort to go on enjoying honeycomb as though no flavour of richer viands had been wafted to the nostrils of the imagination. The sweet and poetical food will be lifted once more resolutely to the lips, but only to create a sickening satiety from which the nauseated victim

finally revolts in desperation. Then come yearnings and weariness, loss of appetite and consequent loss of temper; tears on the one side, an oath or two on the other, and the "happy couple" come home eventually, very much wiser, as a rule, than they started, and certainly in a position to understand several unpleasant truths concerning each other, of which they had not a suspicion before they went away.

Now, if this is too often the melancholy finale to a wedding trip, even with regard to persons who start forth on it full of hopes of happiness, of faith in each other, and of fervent affection on both sides, how much worse is not the case when there are small hopes of happiness, no faith whatever on one side, and of affection none at all on the other?

This was how it was with Captain and Mrs. Maurice Kynaston on their six weeks'

wedding trip abroad. They went to a great many places they had neither of them seen before. They stayed a week in Paris, where Helen bought more dresses and declared herself supremely happy; they visited the falls of the Rhine, which Maurice said deafened him, and ran through Switzerland, which they both voted detestably uncomfortable and dirty—the hotels, *bien entendu*, not the mountains. They stopped a night on the St. Gothard, which was too cold for them, and a week or two at the Italian lakes, which were too hot. They sauntered through the picture-galleries of Milan and Turin, at which places Maurice's yawns became prolonged and audible; and they floated through the lagunes of Venice in gondolas, which Helen asserted to be more ragged and full of fleas than any London four-wheeler. And then they turned homewards,

and by the time they neared the shores of the channel once more they had had so many quarrels that they had forgotten to count them, and they had both privately discovered that matrimony is an egregious and, alas! irreparable mistake. Such a discovery was possibly inevitable; perhaps they would have come in time to the same conclusion had they remained at home, but they certainly found it out all the quicker for having gone abroad.

Helen, perhaps, was the most to be pitied of the two. For Maurice there had been no illusions to dispel, no dreams to be dissipated, no castles built upon the sand to fall shattered into atoms; he had known very well what he had to expect; he did not love the wife that he was marrying, and he did love somebody else. It had not, therefore, been a brilliant prospect of bliss. Nevertheless, he had certainly hoped, with that vague

kind of hope in which Englishmen are prone to indulge, that things would "come right" in some fashion, and that he and Helen would manage "to get on" together. That they did not do so was an annoyance, but hardly a surprise to him.

But to Helen there was a good deal of unexpected grief and mortification of soul. She, at all events, had loved him ; it was her own strength of will, the fervour of her own lawless passion for him that had carried the day, and had, in the end, made her his wife. And she had said to herself, that once married to him, she would make him love her.

Alas, in love there is no such thing as compulsion ! The heart that loves, loves freely, spontaneously, unreasonably ; and, where love is dead, there, neither entreaties nor prayers, nor yet a whole ocean of tears can serve to re-awaken the frail blossom into life.

But Helen had made sure that once abso-

lutely her own, once irrevocably separated from the girl whom instinct had taught her to regard as her rival, Maurice would return to the old allegiance, and learn to love her once more, as in days now long gone by.

A very short experience served to convince her of the contrary. Maurice yawned too openly, was too evidently wearied and bored with her society, too utterly indifferent to her sayings and her doings, for her to delude herself long with the hope of regaining his affection. It was all the same to him whatever she did. If she showered caresses upon him, he submitted meekly, it is true, but with so evident a distaste to the operation that she learnt to discontinue the kisses he cared for so little ; if she tried to amuse him with her conversation, he appeared to be thinking of other things ; if she gave her opinion, he hardly seemed to listen to it. Only when they

quarrelled did the slightest animation enter into their conjugal relations ; and it was almost better to quarrel than to be at peace on such terms as these.

And then Helen got angry with him ; angry and sore, wounded in her heart, and hurt in her vanity. She said to herself that she had been ready to become the best and most devoted of wives ; to study his wishes, to defer to his opinion, to surround him with loving attentions ; but since he would not have it so, then so much the worse for him. She would be no model wife ; no meek slave, subservient to his caprices. She would go her own way, and follow her own will, and make him do what she liked, whether it pleased him or not.

Had Maurice cared to struggle with her for the mastery, things might have ended differently, but it did not seem worth his

while to struggle ; as long as she let him alone, and did not fret him with her incessant jealousies and suspicions, he was content to let her do as she liked.

Even in that matter of living at Kynaston, he learnt, in the end, to give way to her. Sir John, who had already started for Australia, had particularly requested him to occupy the house. Lady Kynaston did nothing but urge it in every letter. Helen herself was bent upon it. There was no good reason that he could bring forward against so reasonable and sensible a plan. The house was all ready, newly decorated and newly furnished ; they had nothing to do but to walk into it. It would save all trouble in looking out for a country home elsewhere, and would, doubtless, be an infinitely pleasanter abode for them than any other house could be. It was the natural and rational thing for them

to do. Maurice knew of only one argument against it, and that one was in his own heart, and he could speak of it to no one.

And yet, after all, what did it matter, what difference would it make? A little nearer, a little further, how could it alter things for either of them? How lessen the impassable gulf between her and him? It was in the natural course of things that he must meet her at times; there would be the stereotyped greeting, the averted glance, the cold shake of hands that could never hope to meet without a pang; these things were almost inevitable for them. A little oftener or a little seldomer, would it matter very much then?

Maurice did not think it would; bound as he was to the woman whom he had made his wife—tied to her by every law of God and of man, of honour, and of manly feeling—that there should be any actual

danger to be run by the near proximity of the woman he had loved, did not even enter into his head. If he had known how to do his duty towards Helen before he had married her, would he not tenfold know how to do so now? Possibly he over-rated his own strength; for, however high are our principles, however exalted is our sense of honour—after all we are but mortals, and unspeakably weak at the very best.

It did not in any case occur to him to look at the question from Vera's point of view. It is never easy for a man to put himself into a woman's place, or to enter into the extra sensitiveness of soul with which she is endowed.

So it was that he agreed to go straight back to Kynaston, and to make the old house his permanent home according to his wife's wishes.

It was whilst the newly-married couple

were passing through Switzerland on their homeward journey that they suddenly came across Mr. Herbert Pryme, who had been performing a melancholy and solitary pilgrimage in the land of tourists.

It was at the table d'hôte at Vevay, upon coming down to that lengthy and untempting repast, chiefly composed of aged goats and stringy hens, which the inventive Swiss waiter exhorts, with the effort of a soaring imagination, into "Chamois" and "Salmi de Poulet," that Captain and Mrs. Kynaston, who had scarcely recovered from a passage of arms in the seclusion of their bed-chamber, suddenly descried a familiar face amongst the long array of uncongenial people ranged down either side of the table.

What the print of a hob-nailed boot must be to the lonely traveller across the desert, what the sight of a man from one's own club going down Pall Mall is in mid-

September, or as a draught of Giesler's '68 to an epicure who has been about to perish on ginger-beer—so did Herbert Pryme's face shine upon Maurice Kynaston out of the arid waste of that Vevay *salle-à-manger*.

In England he had been only an acquaintance—at Vevay he became his most intimate friend. The delight of having a man to speak to, and a man who knew others of his friends, was almost intoxicating. To think of getting one evening—nay, one hour of liberty from that ever present chain of matrimonial intercourse which was galling him so sorely, was a bliss for which he could hardly find words to express his gratitude.

Herbert, who could not quite understand the reason of it, was almost overpowered by the warmth of Captain Kynaston's greeting. To have his place removed next to his own,

and to grasp him heartily by both hands, wringing them with affectionate fervour, was the work of a few seconds. And then, who so lively, so full of anecdote and laughter, so interested in all that could be said to him, as Maurice Kynaston during that dinner?

It made Helen angry to hear him. He could be agreeable enough, she thought bitterly, to a chance acquaintance, picked up nobody knew where; he could find plenty of conversation for this almost unknown young man; it was only when they were alone together that he sat by glumly and silently, without a smile and without a word!

She did not take it into account how surfeited the man was with his honeycomb. Herbert Pryme, individually, was nothing much to him; but he came as the sight of a distant sail is to a shipwrecked mariner. It is doubtful indeed, whether, under the cir-

cumstances, Maurice would not have been equally delighted to have met his tailor or his bootmaker. After dinner was over, the two men went out and smoked their cigars together. This was a fresh offence to Mrs. Kynaston ; usually, she enjoyed an evening stroll with her husband, after dinner, but when he asked her to come out with him on this occasion, she refused, shortly and ungraciously.

“ No, thank you ; if you and Mr. Pryme are going to smoke I could not possibly come ; you know that I hate smoke.”

Poor Herbert was about to protest that nothing would induce him to smoke ; but Maurice passed his arm hurriedly through his.

“ Come along, then, and have a cigar in the garden,” he said, with scarcely concealed eagerness ; he felt like a school-boy let out of school.

Helen went up to her bedroom, and sat sulkily by her open window, looking over the lake on to the mountains. Long after it was dark she could see the two red specks of their cigars, wandering about like fire-flies in the garden, and could hear the crush of the rough gravel under their footsteps, and the low murmur of their voices as they talked.

“You are coming into Meadowshire, are you not?” asked Maurice, ere they parted.

Herbert shook his head.

“Not to the Millers?”

“No, I am afraid I shall never be asked to Shadonake again,” answered the younger man, gloomily.

“Why, I thought you and Beatrice—forgive me—but is it not the case?”

“Her parents have stopped all that, Kynaston.”

“But I am sure Beatrice herself will

never let it stop ; I know her too well," said Maurice, cheerily.

"There are laws in connection with minors," began Mr. Pryme, solemnly.

"Fiddlesticks!" was Maurice's rejoinder.

"There are no laws to prevent young women falling in love, or the world would not be in such a confounded muddle as it frequently is. Don't be downhearted, Pryme, you stick to her, and it will all come right ; and look here, if they won't ask you to Shadonake, I ask you to Kynaston ; drop me a line, and come whenever you like—as soon as you get home."

"You are exceedingly kind ; I shall be only too delighted."

"When will you be home ?"

"I can be home at any time—there is nothing to keep me."

"Well then, come as soon as you like, the sooner the better. And now I must

say good-night and good-bye too, I fear, for we are off early to-morrow. I shall be glad enough to be home; I'm dead sick of the travelling. Good-night, old fellow, it has been a real pleasure to meet you."

And, positively, this was the only evening out of his whole wedding-trip that Maurice had thoroughly enjoyed.

"What on earth kept you out so late with that solemn young prig?" says his wife to him as he opens her door.

"I find him a very pleasant companion, and I have asked him to come to Kynaston," answers Maurice, shortly.

"Umph!" grunts Helen, and inwardly determines that his visit shall be a short one.

Four days later they were in England again.

It was only when the train had actually stopped at Sutton, and he was handing his wife into her own carriage under the arch

of greenery across the road, and amid the ringing cheers of the rustics, who had gathered to see them arrive, that Maurice began to realise how powerfully that home-coming was to be tinged in his own mind with thoughts of her who was once so nearly going as a bride to the same house, where now he was taking Helen.

All along the lane, as they drove under the arches of flags and flowers that had been put up from the station to the park gates, and as they responded to the hearty welcome from the village-folk who lined the road, Maurice was asking himself with a painful anxiety, whether *she* was at Sutton now; whether her eyes had rested upon these rustic decorations, whether her steps had passed along under these mottoes of welcome and of happiness. And then as they neared the church, the clang of the bells burst forth loudly and jarringly.

Was *she*, perchance, there in the house, kneeling alone, white and stricken by her bed-side, whilst those joy-bells rang out their deafening clamour from the church hard by ?

For the life of him, Maurice could not help casting a glance at the vicarage as they drove swiftly by it.

The windows were wide open, but no one looked out of them, the muslin blinds fluttered in the wind, the Gloire de Dijon roses nodded upon the wall, the Virginia creeper hung in crimson festoons over the porch ; but there was not a living creature to be seen.

He had caught no glimpse of the woman that was ever in his heart ; and it was a great pity that he had looked for her, because his wife, whose sharp eyes nothing ever escaped, had seen him look.

CHAPTER VI.

“IF I COULD DIE!”

BUT it was not until Captain and Mrs. Maurice Kynaston had been at home for more than a fortnight that Vera came back to her brother-in-law's house.

She had kept away, poor girl, as long as she could. She had put off the evil hour of her return as long as possible. The Hazeldines had gone to Scotland, and Vera had, in desperation, accepted an invitation to stay with some acquaintances whom she neither knew very well nor liked over much. It had kept her from Sutton a little longer. But the visit had come to an end at last, and what was she to do? She had no other visits to prolong her absence, and her sister

wrote to her perpetually urging her to return. Her home was at Sutton; she had no other place to go to. She had told Sir John that in absence from his brother lay her only hope of safety. But where was she to seek that safety? Where find security, when he, reckless, or, perchance, heedless of her danger, had come to plant himself at her very doors? They should have been far as the poles asunder, and a malevolent fate had willed that the same parish should contain them.

For whatever Maurice did, Vera in no way underrated the danger. Too well she knew her own heart; too surely she estimated the strength of a passion which, repressed and thwarted, and half smothered, as it had been within her, yet burnt but the fiercer and the wilder. For that is the way with love; if it may not flourish and thrive openly and bravely before the eyes of the world, it will

eat into the very heart and life, till all that is fair and sweet in the garden of the soul is choked and blighted and overgrown, till the main-spring of life becomes poisoned, and all things that are happy, withered and dried up.

In Vera's love for Maurice there had been nothing of joy, and all of pain. There had never been for her that sweet illusion of dawning affection—that intangible sense of delight in the consciousness of an unspoken sympathy that is the very essence of a happy love. She had no memories that were serene and untroubled—no days of calm and delicious happiness to recall. His first conscious look had been a terror to her; his words of hopeless love had given her a shock that had been almost physical; and his few passionate kisses had burnt into her very soul, till they had seemed to have been printed upon her lips in fire. Vera's love

had brought her no good thing that she could count. But it had done one thing for her: if it had cursed her life, it had purified her soul.

The Vera who came back to Sutton Vicarage in August was no longer the same woman who had stood months ago on the terrace at Kynaston among the falling autumn leaves, and who had told herself that it was money alone that was worth living for.

She came back to everything that was full of pain, and to much in which there was absolute fear.

Five minutes after she had entered the vicarage drawing-room her tortures began.

"You have not asked after the bride and bridegroom?" says old Mrs. Daintree, as she sits in her corner, darning everlastingly at those brown worsted socks of her son's. Vera thinks she must have been sitting

there darning incessantly, day and night, ever since she had been away. "We are all full of it down here. Such a pretty welcome home they had—arches across the road, and processions with flags, and a band inside the lodge-gates. You should have been here to have seen it. Everybody is making much of Mrs. Kynaston; she is a very pretty woman, I must say, and called here three days ago in the most beautiful Paris gown."

"She seemed very sorry not to see you," says Marion, "and quite disposed to be friendly. I do hope you and she will get on, Vera, in spite of the awkwardness of her being in your place, as it were."

"What do you mean?" rather sharply.

"Only, of course, dear, that it will be rather painful to you, just at first, to see anybody else the mistress at Kynaston, where you yourself might have been—"

"If you had not been a fool," interpolated the old lady, bluntly.

"I don't think I shall mind that much," says Vera, quietly. "Where is Eustace?"

"Oh, he will be in presently; he has gone up to the Hall about the chancel. The men have made all kinds of mistakes about the tessellated pavement; the wrong pattern was sent down from town, and we have had so much trouble about it, and there has been nobody to appeal to to set things right. Captain Kynaston is all very well, and now he is back, I hope we may get things into a little order; but I am sorry to say he takes very little interest in the church or the parish; he is not half so good a squire as poor dear Sir John." And there was a whole volume of unspoken reproach in the sigh with which Marion wound up her remarks.

"Decidedly," said Vera to herself, as she

went slowly upstairs to her own little room ; "decidedly I must get away from all this. I shall have to marry." She leant out of her open window in a frame-work of roses and jessamine, and looked out over the lime-trees towards the hall. Now that the trees were in full leaf, she could catch no glimpse of its red stacked chimneys, and its terraced gardens ; but by-and-by, when the leaves were down, and the trees were bare, she knew she should see it. Every morning when she got up, the sun would be shining full upon it ; every night when she went to bed, she would see the twinkling lights of the many windows gleaming through the darkness ; she would be in her room alone, and *he* would be out there, happy with his wife.

"I shall not be able to bear it," said Vera, slowly, speaking aloud to herself. "I had better marry, and go away ; there is

nothing else to be done. Poor Denis ! he is worthy of a better woman ; but I think he will be good to me."

For it had come to this now, that when Vera thought about marrying, it was upon Denis Wilde that she also pondered.

To be at Sutton, and not to come face to face with Maurice, was of course an impossibility. Carefully as Vera confined herself to the house and garden for the next three days, she could not avoid going to church when Sunday came. And at church were Captain and Mrs. Kynaston. During the service she only saw his back, erect and broad-shouldered, in the seat in front of her, for the pews had been cleared away, and open sittings had been substituted all through the church. Maurice looked neither to the right nor to the left ; he stood, or sat, or knelt, and scarcely turned his head an inch, but Helen's butterfly bonnet was twisted in every

direction throughout the service. It is certain that she very soon knew who it was who had come into the vicarage-seat behind her.

When Vera came out of church, having purposely lingered as long as she could inside, until the rest of the congregation had all gone out, she found the bride and bridegroom waiting for her in the church-yard.

Helen stood with her hand twined with easy familiarity round her husband's arm ; possibly she had studied the attitude with a view to impressing Vera with the perfection of her conjugal happiness. She turned quite delightedly to greet her.

"Oh, here you are at last, Miss Nevill. We have been waiting for you, have we not, Maurice dear? We both felt how pleased we should be to see you. I am very glad you have come back, it will make it much

more pleasant for me at Kynaston; you will come up to see me, won't you? I should like you to see my boudoir, it is lovely!"

"You forget that Miss Nevill has seen it all long ago," said Maurice, gravely; their hands had just met, but he had not looked at her.

"Oh, yes, to be sure; how stupid I am! Of course, I remember now, it was all done up for *you* by poor dear old John. Doesn't it seem funny that I should be going to live in the house? Ah, how d'ye do, Mr. Daintree?" as Eustace came out of the vestry door; "here we are, chattering to your sister. What a delightful sermon, dear Mr. Daintree, and what a treat to be in a Christian church, I mean a Protestant church, again, after those dreadful Sundays on the Continent."

Vera had turned to Maurice.

"Have you any news of Sir John, yet?"

"No, we cannot expect to hear of his arrival till next month. I daresay you will like to hear about him. I will let you know as soon as he writes."

"Thank you; I should like to know about him very much."

Helen, in the middle of Eustace's polite acknowledgment of her compliment to his sermon, was casting furtive glances at her husband; even the two or three grave words he had exchanged with Vera were sufficient to make her uneasy. She desired to torture Vera with envy and with jealousy; she had forgotten to take into account how very easily her own suspicious jealousy could be aroused. She interrupted the vicar in the very middle of his speech.

"Now, really, we must run away. Come, Maurice, darling, we shall be late for lunch;

you and Miss Nevill must finish your confidences another day. You will come up soon, won't you? Any day at five, I am in—good-bye." She shook hands with them, and hurried her husband away.

"What an odd thing it is, that you and that girl never can meet without having all sorts of private things to say to each other," she said, angrily, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Private things! what can you possibly mean, Helen? Miss Nevill was asking me if I had heard of John's arrival."

"I wonder she has the face to mention John's name!"

"Why, pray?"

"After her disgraceful conduct to him."

"I think you know very little about Miss Nevill's conduct, Helen."

"No, I daresay not. And *you* have always known a great deal more about it

than anybody else. That I have always understood, Maurice."

Maurice looked very black, but he was silent.

"I am very glad I told her about the boudoir," continued Helen, spitefully. "How mortified she must feel, to think that it has all slipped through her fingers, and into mine. I do hope she will come up to the house, I shall show her all over it; she will wish she had not been such a fool!"

Maurice was looking at his wife with a singular expression.

"I begin to think you have a very bad heart, Helen," he said, with a contempt in his voice that was very near akin to disgust.

She looked up, a little startled, and put her hand back, caressingly, under his arm.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, Maurice, I don't want to vex you. You know very well how much I love you—and—and—"

looking up with a little smile into his face that was meant as a peace offering, "I suppose I am jealous!"

"Suppose you wait to be jealous until I give you cause to be so," answered her husband, gravely and coldly, but not altogether unkindly, for he meant to do his duty to her, God helping him, as far as he knew how.

But all the way home he walked silently by her side, and wondered whether the sacrifice he had made of his love to his duty had been, indeed, worth it.

It had been hard for him, this first meeting with Vera. He had felt it more than he had believed possible. Instinctively he had realised what she must have suffered; and that her sufferings were utterly beyond his power to console. It began to come into his mind that, meaning to deal rightly by Helen, he had dealt cruelly and badly by

Vera. He had sacrificed the woman he loved to the woman he did not love.

Had it, indeed, been such a right and praiseworthy action on his part? Maurice lost himself in speculation as to what would have happened had he broken his faith to Helen, and allowed himself to follow the dictates of his heart, rather than those of his conscience.

That was what Vera had done for his sake; but what he had been unable to do for hers.

There was a certain hardness about the man, a rigid sense of honour, that was almost a fault; for if it be a virtue to cleave to truth and good faith above everything, to swear to one's neighbour and disappoint him not—even though it be to one's own hindrance—it is certainly not a fine or noble thing to mistake tenderness for a weakness only fit to be crushed out of the

soul with firm hands and an iron determination.

Guilty once, of one irreparable action of weakness, Maurice had set himself determinedly ever after to undo the evil that he had done.

To be true to his brother, to keep his faith with Helen, these had been the only objects he had steadily kept in view: he had succeeded in his efforts, but had scarcely realised that in doing so, he had not only wrecked his own life, but also that of the woman whom he had so infinitely wronged.

But when he saw her once again—when he held for an instant the cold hand within his own—when he marked, with a pang, the dark circles round the averted eyes that spoke so mutely and touchingly of sleepless vigils, and of many tears—when he noted how the lovely sensitive lips trembled a little, as she spoke her few commonplace

words to him. Then Maurice began to understand what he had done to her; and for the first time, something that was almost remorse, with regard to his own conduct towards her, came into his soul.

Such meditations were not, however, safe or profitable to indulge in for long. Maurice recalled his wandering thoughts with an effort, and with something of repentance for having given them place, turned his attention resolutely to his wife's chatter during the remainder of the walk home.

Meanwhile, Vera and the vicar are walking back, side by side, to the vicarage.

"Something," says Eustace, with solemn displeasure; "something must really be done, and that soon, about Ishmael Spriggs; that man will drive me into my grave before my time! Anything more fearfully and awfully out of tune than the *Te Deum* I never heard in the whole course of my life.

I can hear his voice, shouting and bellowing above the whole of the rest of the choir ; he leads all the others wrong. It is not a bit of use to tell me that he is the best behaved man in the parish ; it is not a matter of conduct, as I told Mr. Dale ; it is a matter of voice, and if the man can't be taught to sing in tune, out of the choir he shall go ; it's a positive scandal to the Service. Marion says we shall turn him into an enemy if we don't let him sing, and that he will go to the dissenting chapel, and never come to church any more. Well, I can't help that ; I must give him up to the dissenters. As to keeping him in the choir, it is out of the question, after that *Te Deum*. I shall never forget it. It will give me a nightmare to-night, I am convinced. Wasn't it dreadful, Vera ? "

"Yes, very likely, Eustace," answered Vera, at random. She has not heard one single word he has said.

Eustace Daintree looks round at her sharply. He sees that she is very white, and that there are tears upon her cheeks.

"Why, Vera!" he cries, standing still, you have not listened to a word I have been saying. "What is the matter, child? Why are you crying?"

They are in the vicarage garden now; among the beds of scarlet geraniums, and the tall hollyhocks, and the glaring red gladiolas; a whole bank of greenery, rhododendrons and lauristinas, conceals them from the windows of the house; a garden bench sheltered beneath a nook of the laurel bushes is close by.

With a sudden gesture of utter misery, Vera sinks down upon it, and bursts into a passion of tears.

"My dear child; my poor Vera! What is it? What has happened? What can be the reason of this?"

Mr. Daintree is infinitely distressed and puzzled ; he bends over her, taking her hand between his own. There is something in this wild outburst of grief, from one habitually so calm and self-contained as Vera, that is an absolute shock to him. He had learnt to love her very dearly ; he had thought he understood all the workings of her candid maiden soul ; he had fancied that the story of her broken engagement was no secret to him, that it was but the struggle of a conscientious nature after what was true and honest. It had seemed to him that there had been no mystery in her conduct, for he could appreciate all her motives. And surely, as she had done right, she must be now at peace. He had told himself that the pure instincts of a naturally stainless soul had triumphed in Vera, over the carelessness and worldliness of her early training ; and lo, here was the

passionate weeping of a tempest-tossed woman, whose agony he could not fathom, and whose sorrows he knew not how to divine.

"Vera, will you not tell me?" he asked her, in his distress. "Will you not make a friend of me? My dear, forget that I am a clergyman; remember only that I am your brother, and that I shall know how to feel for you—for you, my dear sister."

But she could not tell him. There are some troubles that must be kept for ever buried within our own souls; to speak of some things is only to make them worse. Only she choked back her sobs, and lifted her face, white and tear-stained; there was a look of hunted despair in her eyes, that bewildered, and even half-terrified him.

"Tell me," she said, with a sort of anger, "tell me, you that are a clergyman—Do you think God has made us only to torment us?"

You have got a daughter, Eustace ; pray God, night and morning, that she may have a hard heart, and that she may never have one gleam of womanly tenderness within her ; for only so are women happy ! ”

He did not answer her wild words. Instinctively he felt that common-place speeches of rebuke or of consolation would be trivial and out of place before the great anguish of her heart. The man's soul was above the narrow limits of his training ; he felt, dimly, that here was something with which it were best not to intermeddle, some trouble for which he could offer no consolation.

She rose and stood before him, holding his hands and gazing earnestly at his anxious face.

“ It has come to this with me,” she said, below her voice ; “ that there are times when there is but one good thing in all the world

that I know any longer how to desire. God has so ordered my life that there is no road open to me that does not lead to sin or to misery. Surely, if He were merciful, He would take back the valueless gift."

"Vera! what do you mean?"

"I mean," she exclaimed, wearily, "that if I could die I should be at peace."

She had walked slowly on; her voice, that had trembled at first with a passionate wildness, had sunk into the spiritless apathy of despair; her head was bent, her hands clasped before her; her long dress trailed with a soft rustle across the grass, sweeping over a whole wilderness of white daisies, that bent their heads beneath its folds as she walked. A gleam of sunshine fell upon her hair, and a bird sang loud and shrill in the lime-trees overhead.

Often and often, in the after days, Eustace Daintree thought of her thus, and remem-

bered with a pang, the sole sad gift that she had craved at Heaven's hands. Often and often the scene came back to him; the sunny garden, the scarlet geraniums flaring in the borders, the smooth green lawn, speckled with shadows from the trees, the wide open windows of his pleasant vicarage beyond, and the beautiful figure of the girl at his side, with her bent head, and her low broken voice—the girl who, at twenty-three, sighed to be rid of the life that had become too hard for her; that precious gift of life which, too often, at three-score years and ten, is but hardly resigned!

"If I could die, I should be at peace," she had said. And she was only twenty-three!

Eustace Daintree never forgot it.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EVENTFUL DRIVE.

I IMAGINE that the most fretting and wearing of all the pains and penalties, which it is the lot of humanity to undergo in this troublesome and naughty world, are those which, by our own folly, our own short-sightedness and our own imprudence, we have brought upon ourselves.

There is a degree of irritation in such troubles, which adds a whole armoury of small knife-cuts to intensify the agony of the evil from which we suffer. It is more dreadful to be moaning over our own mistakes, than over the inscrutable perversity of an unpropitious fate.

Somebody once has said, that most men

grieve over the smallest mistake more bitterly than over the greatest sin. This is decidedly a perversion of the moral nature ; nevertheless, there is a good deal of truth in it.

“ If only I had not been such a fool ! If I could only have foreseen such and such results ? ”

These are more generally the burden of our bitterest self-reproaches.

And this was what Miss Miller was perpetually repeating to herself, during the months of August and September. Beatrice, in these days, was a thoroughly miserable young woman. She was more utterly separated than ever from her lover, and that entirely by her own fault. That foolish escapade of hers to the Temple, had been fatal to her ; her father, who had been inclined to become her lover's friend, had now peremptorily forbidden her ever to mention his name again, and her own lips were sealed

as to the unlucky incident in which she had played so prominent a part.

Beatrice knew that in going alone and on the sly to her lover's chambers, she had undoubtedly compromised her own good name—to confess to her own folly and imprudence, was almost beyond her power, and to clear her lover's name, at the expense of her own, was what, she felt he himself would scarcely thank her for.

Mr. Miller had, of course, said something of what he had discovered at Mr. Pryme's chambers, to the wife of his bosom.

"The young man is not fit for her," he had said; "his private life will not bear investigation. You must tell Beatrice to put him out of her head."

Mrs. Miller had, of course, been virtuously indignant over Mr. Pryme's offences, but she had also been triumphantly elated over her own sagacity.

“Did I not tell you he was not a proper husband for her? Another time, Andrew, you will, I hope, allow that I am the best judge in these matters.”

“My dear, you are always right,” was the meekly conjugal reply, and then Mrs. Miller went her way and talked to Beatrice for half-an-hour over the sinful lives which are frequently led by young men of no family, residing in the Temple, and the shame and disgrace which must necessarily accrue to any well brought up young woman who, in an ill-advised moment, shall allow her affections to rove towards such unsanctified Pariahs of society.

And Beatrice, listening to her blushing, knew what she meant, and yet had no words wherewith to clear her lover's character from the defamatory evidence furnished against him by her own sunshade and gloves.

“Your father has seen with his own eyes, my dear, that which makes it impossible for us ever to consent to your marrying that young man.”

How was Beatrice to say to her mother, “It was I—your daughter—who was there, shut up in Mr. Pryme’s bedroom.” She could not speak the words.

The sunshine twinkled in Shadonake’s many windows and flooded its velvet lawns. Below, the Bath slumbered darkly in the shadow of its ancient steps and its encircling belt of fir-trees; and beyond the flower-gardens, half-an-acre of pineries, and vineries, and orchard-houses glittered in a dazzling parterre of glass-roofs and white paint. Something new—it was an orchid house—was being built. There was always something new, and Mr. Miller was superintending the building of it. He stood over the workmen who were laying the

foundation, watching every brick that was laid down with delighted and absorbed interest. He held a trowel himself, and had tucked up his shirt cuffs in order to lend a helping hand in the operations. There was nothing that Andrew Miller loved so well. Fate and his Caroline had made him a member of Parliament, and had placed him in the position of a gentleman, but nature had undoubtedly intended him for a bricklayer.

Beatrice came out of the drawing-room windows across the lawn to him. She was in her habit, and stood tapping her little boot with her riding whip for some minutes by her father's side.

"I am going to see uncle Tom, papa," she said; "have you any message?"

"Going to Lutterton? Ah, that's right; the ride will do you good, my dear. No; I have no message."

Beatrice went back into the house; her little bay mare stood at the door. She met her mother in the hall.

"I am going to see uncle Tom," she said to her also.

Mrs. Miller always encouraged her children in their attentions to her brother. He was rich and he was a bachelor, he must have saved a good deal one way or another; who could tell how it would be left? And then Beatrice was undoubtedly his favourite. She nodded pleasantly to her daughter.

"Tell uncle Tom to come over to lunch on Sunday, and of course he must come here early for Guy's birthday next week," for there were to be great doings on Guy's birthday. "Ride slowly, Beatrice, or you will get so hot."

Lutterton Castle was a good six miles off. The house stood well, and even imposingly on a high wooded knoll that overlooked the

undulating park, and the open valleys at its feet. It was a great rambling building with a central tower and four smaller ones at each corner. When Mr. Esterworth was at home, which was almost always, it was his vanity to keep a red flag flying from the centre tower as though he had been royalty. All the reception-rooms and more than half the bedrooms were permanently shuttered up, and there was a portly and very dignified housekeeper, who rattled her keys at her châtelaine, and went through all the unused apartments daily, followed by a meek phalanx of housemaids, to see that all the rooms were well-aired and well kept in order, so that at any minute they might be fit for occupation. Five or six times during the hunting season, the large rooms were all thrown open, and there was a hunt breakfast held in the principal dining-hall; but, with that exception, Mr. Esterworth rarely entertained at all.

He occupied three rooms opening out of each other in the small western tower. They consisted of a bedroom, a dressing-room, and a small and rather inconvenient study, where the huntsman, whips, and other official personages connected with the hunt, were received at all hours of the day and night. The room was consequently pervaded by a faint odour of stables and tobacco; there were usually three or four dogs upon the hearth-rug, and it was a rare thing to find Mr. Esterworth in it unaccompanied by some personage in breeches and gaiters, wearing a blue spotted neckcloth, and a horseshoe pin.

Such an individual was receiving an audience at the moment of Miss Miller's arrival, and shuffled awkwardly and hurriedly out of the room by one door, as she entered it by another.

"All right, William," calls the M.F.H.,

after his departing satellite. "Look in again to-night. I shall have her fired, I think, and throw her up till December. Hallo, Pussy, how are you?"

All the four dogs rose from the hearthrug and wagged all their tails solemnly in respectful greeting to her. Beatrice had a pat and a word for each, and a kiss for her uncle, before she sat down on the chair he pulled forward for her.

"What brings you, Pussy? What are you riding?"

"Kitty; they have taken her round to the stables. I thought I'd have lunch with you, uncle Tom."

"Very well; you won't get anything but a mutton chop."

"I don't ask for anything better."

Beatrice felt that her heart was beating. She had taken a desperate resolution during her six miles' solitary ride; she had deter-

mined to take her uncle into her confidence. He had always been indulgent and kind to her, perhaps he would not view her sin in so heinous a light as her mother would ; and who knows ? perhaps he would help her.

“ Uncle Tom, I’m in dreadful trouble, and I want to tell you about it,” she began, trembling.

“ I’m very sorry Pussy ; what is it ? ”

“ I did a shocking, dreadful thing when I was in London. I went to a young man’s rooms, and got shut up in his bedroom.

“ The deuce you did ! ” says Tom Esterworth, opening his eyes.

“ Yes,” continues Beatrice, desperately, and crimson with shame and confusion ; “ and the worst of it is, that I left my sunshade in the sitting-room ; and papa came in, and, of course, he did not know it was mine, and—and—he thinks—he thinks—”

“ That’s the best joke I ever heard in my

life!" cries Mr. Esterworth, laying his head back in the chair, and laughing aloud.

"Uncle Tom!" Beatrice could hardly believe her ears.

"Good lord, what a situation for a comedy!" cries her uncle, between the outbursts of his mirth. "Upon my word, Pussy, you are a good plucked one; there isn't much Miller blood in your veins. You are an Esterworth all over."

"But, uncle, indeed, it's no laughing matter."

"Well, I don't see much to cry at, if your father did not find you out; the young man is never likely to talk."

"Oh, but uncle Tom; papa and mamma think so badly of him, and I can't tell them that I was there, and they will never let me marry him."

"Oh! so you are in love, Pussy?"

"Yes, uncle."

Tom Esterworth smote his hand against his corduroy thigh.

“What a mistake!” he exclaimed, “a girl who can go across country as you do—what on earth do you want to be married for? Is it Mr. Pryme, Pussy?”

Beatrice nodded.

“And he can’t go a yard,” said her uncle, sorrowfully and reproachfully.

“Oh, I think he goes very well, uncle; his seat is capital; it is only his hands that are a bit heavy, but then he has had very little practice.”

“Tut—tut, don’t talk to me, child; he is no horseman. He may be a good young man in his way, but what can have made you take a fancy to a fellow who can’t ride, is a mystery to me! Now tell me the whole story, Pussy.”

And then Beatrice made a clean breast of it.

“ I will see if I can help you,” said her uncle, seriously, when she had finished her story ; “ but I can’t think how you can have set your heart upon a fellow who can’t ride ! ”

This was evidently a far more fatal error in Tom Esterworth’s eyes than the other matter of her being shut up in Mr. Pryme’s rooms. Beatrice began to think she had not done anything so very terrible after all.

“ I must turn it over in my mind. Now come and eat your mutton chop, Pussy, and when we have finished our lunch, you shall come out with me in the dog-cart. I am going to put Clochette into harness for the first time.”

“ Will she go quietly ? ”

“ Like a lamb, I should say. You won’t be nervous ? ”

“ Dear, no ! I am never nervous ; I shall enjoy the fun.”

The mutton chop over, Clochette and the dog-cart came round to the door. She was a raking, bright chestnut mare, with a coat like satin. Even as she stood at the door, she chafed somewhat at her new position between the shafts. This, however, was no more than might have been expected. Mr. Esterworth declining the company of the groom, helped his niece up and took the reins.

“ We will go round by Tripton and back by the Common,” he said, “ and talk this matter well over, Pussy ; we shall enjoy ourselves much better with nobody in the back seat. A man sits there with his arms crossed, and his face like a blank sheet of paper, but one never knows how much they hear, and their ears are always cocked, like a terrier’s on the scent of a rat.”

Clochette went off from the door with a bound, but soon settled down into a good

swinging trot. She kept turning her head nervously from side to side, and there was evidently a little uncertainty in her mind as to whether she should keep to the drive, or deviate on to the grass by the side of it; but upon the whole she behaved fairly well, and turned out of the lodge gates into the high road, with perfect docility and good breeding.

There was a whole avalanche of dogs in attendance. A collie, rushing on tumultuously in front; a "plum pudding" dog between the wheels; a couple of fox-terriers snapping joyfully at each other in the rear; and there was, also, an ill-conditioned animal—half lurcher, half terrier—who killed cats, and murdered fowls, and worried sheep, and flew at the heels of unwary strangers; and was given, in short, to every sort of canine iniquity, and who possessed but one redeeming feature in his

character—that of blind adoration to his master.

This animal, who followed uncle Tom whithersoever he went, came skurrying out of the stables as the dog-cart drove off, and joined in the general scamper.

Perhaps the dogs may have been too much for Clochette's nerves, or perhaps the effort of behaving well as far as the park gates with those horrible wheels rattling behind her, was as much as any hunter born and bred could be expected to do, or perhaps uncle Tom was too free with that whip with which he caressed her shining flanks; but be that as it may, no sooner was Clochette's head well turned along the straight high-road with its high-tangled hedgerows on either side, than she began to show symptoms of behaving very badly indeed. She bucked and pranced, and stood on her hind legs, she whipped suddenly

round, pirouetted upon her own axis with the dexterity of a circus performer, and demonstrated very plainly that if she only dared she would like to take to her heels in the reverse direction to that which her driver desired her to go.

All this was, however, equally delightful and exciting both to Tom Esterworth and his niece. There was no apprehension in Beatrice's mind, for her uncle drove as well as he rode, and she felt perfectly secure in the strong, supple hands that guided Clochette's erratic movements.

"There is not a kick in her," uncle Tom had said as they started, and he repeated the observation now; and kicking being out of the category of Clochette's iniquities, there was nothing else to fear.

No sooner, however, had the words left his lips than a turn of the road brought them within sight of a great volume of black

smoke, rushing slowly but surely towards them ; whilst a horrible roaring and howling, as of an antediluvian monster in its wrath, filled the silence of the summer afternoon with a hideous and unholy confusion.

Talk about there being no wild animals in our peaceful land ! What could have been the Megatherium and the Ichthyosaurus, and all the fire-spitting dragons of antiquity, compared to the traction-engines of the nineteenth century !

“It’s a steam plough !” ejaculated Beatrice, below her breath.

“D—n !” cried her uncle, not at all below *his* breath.

As to Clochette, she stood for an instant stock still, with her ears pricked, and her head well up, facing the horrors of her situation ; next she gave an angry snort, as though to say : “No ! *this* is too much !” Then she turned short round and began a

series of peculiar bounds and plunges, accompanied by an ominous uplifting of her hind quarters, which had plainly but one object in view—the correct conjugation of the verb active, “to kick.”

There was a crunching of woodwork, a cracking, as of iron hoofs against the splash-board. Beatrice instinctively put up her hands before her face, but she did not utter a sound.

“Do you think you could get down, Pussy, and go to her head?”

“Shall I hold the reins, uncle?”

“No, you couldn’t hold her, she’ll be over the hedge if I let go of her. Get down, if you can.”

It was not easy. Beatrice was in her habit, and to jump from the vacillating height of a dog-cart to the earth, is no easy matter, even to a man, unencumbered with petticoats.

“Try and get over the back,” said her uncle, who was in momentary terror lest the mare’s heels should be dashed into her face. And Beatrice, with that finest trait of a woman’s courage, in danger, which consists in doing exactly what she is told, began to scramble over the back of her seat.

The situation was critical in the extreme ; the traction-engine came on a-pace, the man with the red flag having paused at a public-house round the corner, was only now running back into his place. Uncle Tom shouted vainly to him ; his voice was drowned in the deafening roar of the advancing monster.

But already help was at hand, unheard and unperceived by either uncle or niece ; a horseman had come rapidly trotting up the road behind them. To spring from his horse, who was apparently accustomed to traction-engines, and stood quietly by,

to rush to the plunging, struggling mare, and to seize her by the head was the work of a moment.

“ All right, Mr. Esterworth,” shouted the new comer. “ I can hold her, if you can get down ; we can lead her into the field ; there is a gate ten yards back.”

Uncle Tom threw the reins to his niece and slipped to the ground ; between them, the two men contrived to quiet the terrified Clochette, and to lead her towards the gate.

In another three minutes they were all safely within the shelter of the hedge. The traction-engine passed, snorting forth fire and smoke, on its devastating way ; and Clochette stood by, panting, trembling, and covered with foam. Beatrice, safely on the ground, was examining ruefully the amount of damage done to the dog-cart, and Mr. Esterworth was shaking hands with his deliverer.

It was Herbert Pryme.

"That's the last time I ever take a lady out, driving without a man servant behind me," quoth the M.F.H. "What we should have done without your timely assistance, sir, I really cannot say; in another minute she would have kicked the trap into a thousand bits. You have saved my niece's life, Mr. Pryme."

"Indeed, I did very little," said Herbert, modestly, glancing at Beatrice, who was trembling, and rather pale; but, perhaps, that was only from her recent fright. She had not spoken to him, only she had given him one bewildered glance, and then had looked hastily away.

"You have saved her life," repeated Mr. Esterworth, with decision. "I hope you do not mean to contradict my words, sir? You have saved Beatrice's life, sir, and it's the most providential thing in this world for

you, as Clochette very nearly kicked her to pieces under your nose. I shall tell Mr. and Mrs. Miller that they are indebted to you for their daughter's life. Young people, I am going to lead this brute of a mare home, and, if you like to walk on together to Lutterton, in front of me, why you may."

That was how Herbert Pryme came to be once more re-instated in the good graces of his lady love's father and mother.

Mr. Esterworth contrived to give them so terrifying an account of the danger in which Beatrice had been placed, and so graphic and highly-coloured a description of Herbert Pryme's pluck and sagacity in rushing to her rescue, that Mr. and Mrs. Miller had no other course left than to shake hands gratefully with the man to whom, as uncle Tom said, they literally owed her life.

"I could not have saved her without him," said uncle Tom, drawing slightly

upon his imagination ; in “another minute she must have been kicked to pieces, or dashed violently to the earth among the broken fragments of the cart, and,” with a happy afterthought, “the steam plough would have crushed its way over her mangled body.”

Mrs. Miller shuddered.

“Oh, Tom, I never can trust her to you again!”

“No, my dear ; but I think you must trust her to Mr. Pryme ; that young man deserves to be rewarded.”

“But, my dear Tom, there are things against his character. I assure you, Andrew himself saw—”

“Pooh ! pooh !” interrupted Mr. Esterworth. “Young men who sow their wild oats early, are all the better husbands for it afterwards. I will give him a talking to, if you like, but you and your husband must

let Pussy have her own way, it is the least you can do, after his conduct ; and don't worry about his being poor, Caroline ; I have nothing better to do with my money, and I shall take care that Pussy is none the worse off for my death. She is worth all the rest of your children put together—an Esterworth, every inch of her ! ”

That, it is to be imagined, was the clenching argument in Mrs. Miller's mind. Uncle Tom's money was not to be despised, and by reason of his money, uncle Tom's wishes were bound to carry some weight with them.

Mr. Pryme, who had been staying for a few days at Kynaston, where, however, the cordial welcome given to him by its master was, in a great measure, neutralised by the coldness and incivility of its mistress, removed himself and his portmanteau, by uncle Tom's invitation, to Lutterton, and

his engagement to Miss Miller became a recognised fact.

“All the same, it is a very bad match for her,” said Mrs. Miller, in confidence, to her husband.

“And I should very much like to know who that sunshade belonged to,” added the M.P. for Meadowshire, severely.

“I think, my dear, we shall have to overlook that part of the business, for, as Tom will leave them his money, why—”

“Yes, yes, I quite understand; we must hope the young man has had a good lesson. Let bygones be bygones, certainly,” and Mr. Miller took a pinch of snuff reflectively, and wondered what Tom Esterworth would “cut up for.”

“But I am *determined*,” said Mrs. Miller, ere she closed the discussion, “I am determined that I will do better for Geraldine.”

After all, the mother had a second string

to her bow, so the edict went forth that Beatrice was to be allowed to be happy in her own way, and the shadow of that fatal sunshade was no longer to be suffered to blacken the moral horizon of her father's soul.

CHAPTER VIII.

BY THE VICARAGE GATE.

THE peacocks had it all to themselves on the terrace walk at Kynaston. They strutted up and down, craning and bridling their bright-hued necks with a proud consciousness of absolute proprietorship in the place, and their long tails trailed across the gravel behind them, with the soft rustle of a woman's garments. Now and then, their sad, shrill cries echoed weirdly through the deserted gardens.

There was no one to see them—the gardeners had all gone home—and no one was moving from the house. Only one small boy with a rough head and a red face, stood below the stone balustrade, half-hidden

among the hollyhocks and the roses, looking wistfully up at the windows of the house.

“What am I to do with it?” said Tommy Daintree, half aloud to himself, and looked sorely perplexed and bewildered.

Tommy had a commission to fulfil, a commission from Vera. He carried a little note in his hands, and he had promised Vera faithfully that he would wait near the house till he saw Captain Kynaston come in from his day’s shooting, and give him the note into his own hands.

“You quite understand, Tommy; no one else.”

“Yes, auntie, I quite understand.”

And Tommy had been waiting there an hour, but still there was no sign of Captain Kynaston’s return; he was getting very tired, and very hungry by this time, for he had had no tea. He had heard the dressing-bell ring long ago in the house—it must be

close upon their dinner hour. Tommy could not guess, that, by an unaccustomed chance, the master of the house had gone in by the back-door to-day, and that he had been in some time.

Presently, some one pushed aside the long muslin curtains, and came stepping out of the long French window, on to the terrace. It was Helen.

She was dressed for dinner, she wore a pale blue dress, cut open at the neck, and a heavy gold chain and jewelled locket hung at her throat; she turned round, half laughing, to some one who was following her.

“ You will see all the county magnates at Shadonake to-morrow. You will have quite enough of them, I promise you; they are neither lively nor entertaining.”

A young man, also in evening dress, had followed her out on to the terrace; it was

Denis Wilde ; he had arrived from town by the afternoon train. Why he should have thrown over several very good invitations to country houses in Norfolk and Suffolk, where there were large and cheerful parties gathered together, and partridge shooting to make a man dream of, in order to come down to the poor sport of Kynaston, and the insipid society of a newly married couple, with whom he was not on very intimate terms, is a problem which Mr. Wilde alone could have satisfactorily solved. Being here, he was naturally disposed to make himself extremely agreeable to his hostess.

“ You can’t think how anxious I am to inspect the *élite* of Meadowshire ! ” he said, laughing. “ My life is an incomplete thing without a sight of it.”

“ You will witness the last token of mental aberration in a decently brought up young woman, in the person of Beatrice

Miller. You know her. Well, she has actually engaged herself to a barrister whom nobody knows anything about, and who—*bien entendu*—has no briefs—they never have any. He was staying here for a couple of days ; a slow, heavy young man, who quoted Blackstone. Maurice took a fancy to him abroad ; however, he was clever enough to save Beatrice's life by stopping a runaway horse. Some people say the accident was the invention of the lovers' own imaginations ; however, the parents believed in it, and it turned the scales in his favour, but he has taken himself off, I am thankful to say, and is staying at Lutterton with her uncle. Beatrice might have married well, but girls are such fools. Hallo, Topsy, what are you barking at ?”

Mrs. Kynaston's pug had come tearing out of the house, with a whole chorus of noisy yappings. The peacocks, deeply wounded

in their tenderest feelings, instantly took wing, and went sailing away majestically over the crimson and gold parterre of flowers below.

“What can possess her, to bark at the peacocks?” said Helen. “Be quiet, Topsy.”

But Topsy refused to be tranquillised.

“She is barking at something below the terrace; perhaps there is a cat there,” said Denis.

“If so, it would be Dutch courage, indeed,” answered Helen, laughing. They went to the edge of the stone parapet, and looked over; there stood Tommy Daintree below them, among the hollyhocks.

“Why, little boy, who are you, and what do you want? Why, are you not Mr. Daintree’s little boy?”

“Yes.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“I want to give a note to Captain Kynas-

ton," said Tommy, crimson with confusion.

"Is he ever coming in?"

"He is in now, give me the note."

"I was to give it to himself, to nobody else."

"Who told you?"

"Aunt Vera."

"Oh!" There was a whole volume of meaning in the simple exclamation. Mrs. Kynaston held out her hand. "You can give it to me, I am Captain Kynaston's wife, you know. Give it to me, Tommy. Your name is Tommy, isn't it? Yes, I thought so. Mr. Wilde, will you be so kind as to fetch Tommy a peach off the dinner-table? Give the note to me, my dear, and you can tell your aunt that it shall be given to Captain Kynaston directly."

When Denis returned from his mission to the dining-room, he only found Tommy waiting for his peach upon the terrace steps.

Mrs. Kynaston had gone back into the house.

Tommy went off devouring his prey, with, it must be confessed, rather a guilty conscience over it. Somehow or other, he felt that he had failed in the trust his aunt had placed in him ; but then, Mrs. Kynaston had been very kind and very peremptory ; she had almost taken the letter out of his hand, and she had smiled and looked quite like a fairy princess out of one of Minnie's story books, in her pretty blue silk dress and shining locket—and then, peaches were so very nice !

What happened to Denis Wilde after the small boy's departure, was this. He sauntered back to the drawing-room windows and looked in ; no one was there. He then wandered further down the terrace till he came opposite the window of the boudoir—Mrs. Kynaston's own boudoir—which Sir

John's loving hands had once lined with blue and silver for his Vera. Here he caught sight of Mrs. Kynaston's fair head and slender figure. Her back was turned to him; he was on the point of calling out to her, when suddenly the words upon his lips were arrested by something which he saw her doing. Instead of speaking, he simply stood still and stared at her.

Mrs. Kynaston, unconscious of observation, held the note which Tommy had just given her, over the steam of a small jug of hot water, which she had just hastily ordered her maid to bring to her. In less than a minute the envelope unfastened of itself. Helen then deliberately took out the note and read it.

What she read was this:—

“Dear Captain Kynaston,—I have something that I have promised to give to you when you are alone. Would you mind

coming round to the vicarage after dinner to-night, at nine o'clock? You will find me at the gate.

Sincerely yours,

VERA NEVILL."

Then Helen lit a candle, and fastened the letter up again with sealing-wax.

And Denis Wilde crept away from the window on tiptoe with a sense of shocked horror upon him, such as he never remembered having experienced in his life before.

All at once his pretty, pleasant hostess, with whom he had been glad enough to banter, and with whom even he had been ready to enter upon a mild and innocent flirtation, became suddenly horrible and hateful to him; and there came into his mind, like an inspiration, the knowledge of her enmity to Vera; for it was Vera's note that she had opened and read. The boy's instincts were straightway all awake with

the acuteness of a danger; to something—he knew not what—that threatened the woman he loved.

“Thank God, I am here,” he said to himself. “That woman is her foe, and she will be dangerous to her. I would not have come to her house had I known it; but now I am here I will stay, for it is certain that she will need a friend.”

At dinner time the note lay by Maurice’s side on the table. Whilst the soup was being helped he took it up and opened it. He little knew how narrowly both his wife and his guest watched him as he read it.

But his face was inscrutable. Only he talked a little more, and seemed, perhaps, in better spirits than usual; but that is what a stranger could not have noticed, although it is possible that Helen may have done so.

“By the vicarage gate,” she had said, and it was there that he found her. Behind

her lay the dark and silent garden, beyond it the house, with its wide-open drawing-room windows, and the stream of yellow light from the lamp within, lying in a golden streak across the lawn. She leant over the gate ; an archway of greenery, dark in the night's dim light, was above her head, and clusters of pale, creamy roses hung down about her on every side.

It was that sort of owl's light that has no distinctness in it, and yet is far removed from darkness. Vera's perfect figure, clad in some white, clinging garment that fell about her in thick, heavy folds, stood out with a statue-like clearness against the dark shrubs behind her. She seemed like some shadowy queen of the night. Out of the dimness, the clear oval of her perfect face shone pale as the waning moon far away behind the church tower, whilst the dusky veil of her dark hair lost itself vaguely in the

shadows, and melted away into the background. A poet might have hymned her thus, but no painter could have painted her.

And it was thus that he found her. For the first time for many weary weeks and months he was alone with her ; for the first time he could speak to her freely and from his heart. He knew not what it was that had made her send for him, or why it was that he had come. He did not remember her note, or that she had said that she had something for him. All he knew was that she had sent for him, and that he was with her.

There was the gate between them, but her white soft hands were clasped loosely together over the top of it. He took them feverishly between his own.

“I am late—you have waited for me, dear? Oh, Vera, how glad I am to be with you !”

There was a dangerous tenderness in his voice that frightened her. She tried to draw away her hands.

“I had something for you, or I should not have sent—please, Captain Kynaston—Maurice,—please let my hands go.”

He was alone under the star-flecked heavens with the woman he loved, there was all the witchery of the pale moonlight about her, all the sweet perfumes of the summer night to intensify the fascination of her presence. There was a nameless glamour in the luminous dimness—a subtle seduction to the senses in the silence and the solitude; a bird chirruped once among the tangled roses overhead, and a soft, sighing breeze fluttered for one instant amid its long, trailing branches. And then, God knows how it came to pass, or what madness possessed the man; but suddenly there was no longer any faith, or honour, or truth

for him—nothing on the face of the whole earth but Vera.

He caught her passionately in his arms, and showered upon her lips the maddest, wildest kisses that man ever gave to woman.

For one instant she lay still upon his heart; all the fury of her misery was at rest—all the storm of her sorrow was at peace—for one instant of time she tasted of life's sublimest joy ere the waters of blackness and despair closed in once more over her soul. For one instant only—then she remembered, and withdrew herself shudderingly from his grasp.

"For God's sake have pity upon me, Maurice!" she wailed. It was the cry of a broken heart that appealed to his manhood and his honour more surely, and more directly, than a torrent of reproach or a storm of indignation.

"Forgive me," he murmured humbly; "I

am a brute to you. I had forgotten myself. I ought to have spared you, sweet. See, I have let you go, I will not touch you again ; but it was hard to see you alone, to be near you, and yet to remember how we are parted. Vera, I have ruined your life, it is wonderful that you do not hate me."

"A true woman never hates the man who has been hard on her," she answered, smiling sadly.

"If it is any comfort to you to know it, I too, am wretched ; now it is too late ; I know that my life is spoilt also."

"No ; why should that comfort me ?" she said, wearily. She leant half back against the gate—if he could have seen her well in the uncertain light, he would have been shocked at the worn and haggard face of his beautiful Vera.

Presently she spoke again.

“ I am sorry that I asked you to come—it was not wise, was it, Maurice ? How long must you stop at Kynaston ? Can you not go away ? We are neither of us strong enough to bear this—I, I cannot go—but you, *must* you be always here ? ”

“ Before God,” he answered, earnestly, “ I swear to you that I will go away, if it is in my power to go.”

“ Thank you ; ” then with an effort she roused herself to speak to him. “ But that is not what I wanted to say ; let me tell you why I sent for you. I made a promise, a wretched, stupid thing, to a tiresome little man I met in London—a Monsieur D’Arblet, a Frenchman ; do you know him ? ”

“ D’Arblet ! I never heard the name in my life that I know of.”

“ Really, that seems odd, for I have a little parcel from him to you, and strangely

enough, he made me promise on my word of honour to give it you when no one was near. I did not know how to keep my promise, for, though we may sometimes meet in public, we are not often likely to meet alone. I have it here; let me give it to you and have done with the thing; it has been on my mind."

She drew a small packet from her pocket and was about to give it to him, when suddenly his ear caught the sound of an approaching footstep; he looked nervously round, then he put forth his hand quickly and stopped her.

"Hush, give me nothing now!" he said in a low hurried voice. "To-morrow we shall meet at Shadonake; if you will go near the Bath some time during the day, after lunch is over I will join you there, and you can give it to me; it can be of no possible importance; go

in now quickly; good-night. It is my wife."

She turned and fled swiftly back to the house through the darkness, and Maurice was left face to face with Helen

CHAPTER IX.

DENIS WILDE'S LOVE.

HE had not been mistaken. It was Helen who had crept out after him in the darkness, and whose slight figure in her pale blue dress stood close by him in an angle of the road.

How long she had stood there, and what she had heard, he did not know. He expected a torrent of abuse, and a storm of reproaches from her, but she refrained from either. She passed her arm within his, and walked beside him for several minutes in silence. Maurice, who felt rather guilty, was weak enough to say, hesitatingly,

“The night was so fine, I strolled out to smoke—”

"*Qui s'excuse s'accuse*," quoted Helen ;
"only you are not smoking, Maurice!"

"My cigar has gone out ; I—I met Miss Nevill at the gate of the vicarage."

"So I saw," rather significantly.

"I stopped to have a little talk to her. There is no harm, I suppose in that!" he added, irritably.

Helen laughed shortly and harshly.

"Harm! oh dear, no; whoever said there was? By the way, is not this freak of yours of going out into the roads to smoke, as you say, alone, rather a slight on your guest? Here is Mr. Wilde; how very amusing, we all seem to be drawn out towards the vicarage to-night."

Denis Wilde, in fact, had followed in the wake of his hostess, and they met him now by the lodge gates.

"How very strange!" called out Helen to him, in her scornful, bantering voice,

"how strange that we should all have gone out for solitary rambles and all meet in the same place; and there was Miss Nevill out in the vicarage garden, also on a solitary ramble."

"Is Miss Nevill there? I think I will go on and call upon her," said Denis.

"You, too, Mr. Wilde!" cried Helen: "Have you fallen a victim to the beauty? We heard enough of her in town; she turned all the men's heads; even married men are not safe from her snares, and yet it is singular that none of her admirers care to marry her; there are some women whom all men make love to, but whom none care to make wives of!"

And Maurice was a coward, and spoke no word in her defence; he did not dare; but young Denis Wilde drew himself up proudly.

"Mrs. Kynaston," he said sternly, "I

must ask you not to speak slightly of Miss Nevill."

"Good gracious, why not? I suppose we are all free to use our tongues, and our eyes, in this world! Why should you become the woman's champion?"

"Because," answered Denis, gravely, "I hope to make her my wife."

Maurice was man enough to hold out his hand to him in the darkness.

"I am glad of it," he said, rather hoarsely; "make her happy, Denis, if you can."

"Thanks. I shall go on to see her now."

Helen murmured an unintelligible apology, and Denis Wilde passed onwards towards the vicarage.

He had taken her good name into his keeping, he had shielded her from that other woman's slandering tongue; but he had done so in his despair. He had spoken

no lie in saying that he hoped to make her his wife ; but it was no doubt a fact, that Helen and her husband would now believe him to be engaged to her. Would Vera be induced to verify his words, and to place herself and her life beneath the shelter of his love, or would she only be angry with him for venturing to presume upon his hopes ? Denis could not tell.

Ten minutes later, he stood alone with her in the vicarage dining-room ; he had sent in his card with a pencilled line upon it, to ask for a few minutes' conversation with her.

Vera had desired that her visitor might be shown into the dining-room. Old Mrs. Daintree had been amazed and scandalised, and even Marion had opened her eyes at so unusual a proceeding ; but the vicar was out by a sick bedside in the village, and no one else ever controlled Vera's actions.

Nevertheless, she herself looked somewhat surprised at so late a visit from him. And then somehow or other, Denis made it plain to her, how it was he had come, and what he had said of her. Her name, he told her, had been lightly spoken of; to have defended it without authority, would have been to do her more harm than good; to take it under his lawful protection had been instinctively suggested to him, by his longing to shield her. Would she forgive him?

“It was Mrs. Kynaston who spoke evil things of me,” said Vera, wearily. She was very tired, she hardly understood, she scarcely cared about what he was saying to her; it mattered very little what was said of her. There was that other scene, under the shadow of the roses of the gateway, so vividly before her; the memory of Maurice’s passionate kisses upon her lips, the sound

of his beloved voice in her ears. What did anything else signify ?

And meanwhile, Denis Wilde was pouring out his whole soul to her.

“My darling ; give me the right to defend you, now and always,” he pleaded ; “do not refuse me the happiness of protecting your dear name from such women. I know you don’t love me, dear, not as I love you, but I will not mind that, I will ask you for nothing that you will not give me freely ; only try me,—I think I could make you happy, love. At any rate, you shall have anything that tenderness and devotion can give you, to bring peace into your life. Vera, darling, answer me.

“Oh, I am very tired,” was all she said, moaningly and wearily, passing her hand across her aching brow, like a worn-out child.

It was life or death to him. To her it

was such a little matter! What were all his words and his prayers beside that heart-ache that was driving her into her grave! He could do her no good. Why could he not leave her in peace?

And yet, at length, something of the fervour and the passion of his love struck upon her soul, and arrested her attention. There is something so touching and so pitiful in that first boy-love, that asks for nothing in return, craves for no other reward than to be suffered to exist; that amongst all the selfish and half-hearted passions of older and wiser men, it must needs elicit some response of gratitude, at least, if not of answering love, in the heart of the woman who is the object of such rare devotion.

It dawned at length upon Vera, as she listened to his fervent pleading, and as she saw the tears that rose in poor Denis's earnest eyes, and the traces of deep emotion

on his smooth, boyish face, that here was, perchance, the one utterly pure and noble love that had ever been laid at her feet.

There arose a sentiment of pity in her heart, and a vague wonder as to his grief. Did he suffer, she asked herself, as she herself suffered?

"Vera, Vera, I only ask you to be my wife. I do not ask you for your heart; only give me your dear self. Only let me be always with you to brighten your life, and to take care of you."

How was she to resist such absolute unselfishness?

"Oh, Denis, how good you are to me!" burst from her lips. "How can I take you at your word? Do you not know that my heart is gone from me? I have no love to give you."

"Yes, yes, darling," he said, quickly, pressing her hand to his lips. "Do not

pain yourself by speaking of it. I have guessed it. I have always seemed to know it. But it is hopeless, is it not? And I—I would so gladly take you away and comfort you, if I could.”

And so, in the end, she half yielded to him. What else was she to do? She gave him a sort of promise.

“If I can, it shall be as you wish,” she said; “but give me till to-morrow night. I will think of it all day, and if you will come here again to-morrow evening, I will answer you. Give me one more day—only one,” she repeated, with a dull reiteration, out of her utter weariness.

“One day will soon be gone!” he said joyfully, as he bade her good night.

Alas, how little he knew what that day was to bring forth!

That night the heavens were overcast with heavy clouds, and torrents of rain

poured down upon the face of the earth, and peal after peal of thunder boomed through the heavy, heated air. Helen could not sleep; she rose, feverish and unrested from her husband's side, and paced wildly and miserably about the room. Then she went to the window and drew back the curtain, and looked out upon the storm-driven world. The clouds racked wildly across the sky; the trees bent and swayed before the howling wind; the rain beat in floods upon the ground; yet greater and fiercer still was the tempest that raged in Helen Kynaston's heart. Hatred, jealousy, and malice strove and struggled within her, and something direr still—a terror that she could not quench nor stifle; for late that night her husband had said to her suddenly, without a word of warning or preparation—

“Helen, do you know a Frenchman called D'Arblet?”

Helen had been at her dressing-table—her back was turned to him—he did not see the livid pallor which blanched her cheeks at his question.

A little pause, during which she busied herself among the trifles upon the table.

“No, I never heard the name in my life,” she said, at length.

“That is odd—because neither have I—and yet the man has sent me a parcel.” It was of so little importance to him, that it did not occur to him that there could, possibly, be any occasion for secrecy concerning Vera’s commission. What could an utter stranger have to send to him that could possibly concern him in any way?

It did not strike him how strained and forced was the voice in which his wife presently asked him a question.

“And the parcel? You have opened it?”

“No, not yet,” began Maurice, stifling a

yawn ; and he would have gone on to explain to her that it was not yet actually in his possession—although, probably, he would not have told her that it was Vera who was to give it to him ; only at that minute the maid came into the room, and he changed the subject.

But Helen had guessed that it was Vera who was the bearer of that parcel. How it had come to pass, she could not tell, but too surely she divined that Vera had in her possession those fatal letters that she had once written to the French vicomte ; the letters that would blast her for ever in her husband's estimation, and turn his lukewarmness and his coldness into actual hatred and repulsion.

And was it likely that Vera, with such a weapon in her hands, would spare her ? What woman, with so signal a revenge in her power, would forego the delight of

wreaking it upon the woman who had taken from her the man she loved? Helen knew that in Vera's place she would show no mercy to her rival.

It was all clear as daylight to her now; the appointment at the vicarage gate, the something which she had said in her note she had for him; the whole mystery of the secret meeting between them—it was Vera's revenge. Vera, whom Maurice loved, and whom she, Helen, hated with such a deadly hatred!

And then, in the silence of the night, whilst her husband slept, and whilst the thunder and the wind howled about her home, Helen crept forth from her room, and sought for that fatal packet of letters which her husband had told her he had “not yet” opened.

Oh, if she could only find them, and destroy them before he ever saw them again!

Long and patiently she looked for them, but her search was in vain. She ransacked his study and his dressing-room; she opened every drawer, and fumbled in every pocket, but she found nothing.

She was frightened, too, to be about the house like a thief in the night. Every gust of wind that creaked among the open doors made her start, every flash of lightning that lighted up the faces of the old family portraits, looking down upon her with their fixed eyes, made her turn pale and shiver, lest she should see them move, or hear them speak.

Only her jealousy and her hatred burnt fiercely above her terror; she would not give in, she told herself, until she found it.

Denis Wilde, who was restless too, had heard her soft footsteps along the passage outside his door, and with a vague uneasiness as to who could be about at such an

hour, he came creeping out of his room, and peeped in at the library door.

He saw her sitting upon the floor, a lighted candle by her side, an open drawer, out of her husband's writing-table, upon her lap, turning over papers, and bills, and note-books, with eager, trembling hands. And he saw in her white, set face, and wild, scared eyes, that which made him draw back swiftly and shudderingly from the sight of her.

"Good God!" he murmured to himself, as he sought his room again, "the woman has murder in her face!"

And at last she had to give it up; the letters were not to be found. The storm without settled itself to rest, the thunder died away in the far distance over the hills, and Helen, worn out with fatigue and emotion, sought a troubled slumber upon the sofa in her dressing-room.

"She cannot have given it to him," was

the conclusion she came to at last. “ Well, she will do so to-morrow, and I—I will not let her out of my sight, not for one instant, all the day ! ”

CHAPTER X.

A GARDEN PARTY.

MR. GUY MILLER is a young gentleman who has not played an important part in these pages ; nevertheless, but for him, sundry events which took place at Shadonake at this time would not have had to be recorded.

It so happened, that Guy Miller's twenty-first birthday was in the third week of September, and that it was determined by his parents to celebrate the day in an appropriate and fitting manner. Guy was a youth of no particular looks, and no particular manners ; he had been at Oxford, but his father had lately taken him away from it, with a view to his travelling, and seeing

something of the world, before he settled down as a country gentleman. He had had no opportunity, therefore, of distinguishing himself at college; but as he was not overburdened with brains, and had, moreover, never been known to study with interest any profounder literature than "Handley Cross," and "Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour," it is possible that, even had he been left undisturbed to pursue his studies at the University, he would never have developed into a bright or shining ornament at that seat of learning.

As it was, Guy came home to the paternal mansion, an ignorant, but amiable and inoffensive young man, with a small, fluffy moustache, and no particular bent in life beyond smoking short pipes, and loafing about the premises with his hands in his trousers pockets.

He was a tolerable shot, and a plucky,

though not a graceful horseman. He hated dancing, because he trod on his partner's toes, and shunned ladies' society, because he had to make himself agreeable to them. Nevertheless, having been fairly "licked into shape" by a course successively of Eton and of Oxford, he was able to behave like a gentleman in his mother's house, when it was necessary for him to do so, and he quite appreciated the fact of his being an important personage in the Miller family.

It was to celebrate the coming of age of this interesting young gentleman, that Mr. and Mrs. Miller had settled to give a monster entertainment to several hundreds of their fellow creatures.

The proceedings were to include a variety of instructive and amusing pastimes, and were to last pretty nearly all day. There was to be a country flower-show, in a big tent on the lawn ; that was pure business, and

concerned the farmers as much as the gentry. There were also to be athletic sports, in a field, for the active young men, lawn-tennis for the active young women, an amateur Polo-match, got up by the energy and pluck of Miss Beatrice and her uncle Tom ; a " cold collation " in a second tent to be going on all the afternoon ; the whole to be finished up with a dance in the large drawing-room, for a select few, after sunset.

The programme, in all conscience, was varied enough ; and the day broke hopefully, after the wild storm of the previous night, bright, and cool, and sunny, with every prospect of being perfectly fine.

Beatrice, happy in the possession of her lover, was full of life and energy ; she threw herself into all the preparations of the *fête* with her whole heart. Herbert, who came over from Luttertton at an early hour, followed her about like a dog, obeying her

orders implicitly, but impeding her proceedings considerably by a constant under-current of love-making, by which he strove to vary and enliven the operation of sticking standard flags into the garden borders, and nailing up wreaths of paper roses inside the tent.

Mrs. Miller, having consented to the engagement, like a sensible woman, was resolved to make the best of it, and was, if not cordial, at least pleasantly civil, to her future son-in-law. She had given over Beatrice as a bad job; she was resolved to find suitable matches for Guy and for Geraldine.

By one o'clock, the company was actually beginning to arrive, the small fry of the neighbourhood being, of course, the first to appear. By-and-by came the rank and fashion of Meadowshire, and by three o'clock the gardens were crowded.

It was a brilliant scene ; there was the gaily-dressed crowd going in and out of the tents, groups of elderly people sitting talking under the trees, lawn-tennis players at one end of the garden, the militia band playing Strauss's waltzes at the other, the scarlet and white flags floating bravely over everybody in the breeze, and a hum of many voices and a sound of merry laughter in every direction.

Mr. and Mrs. Miller, and Guy, the hero of the day, moved about amongst the guests from group to group ; Guy, it must be owned, looking considerably bored. Beatrice, with her lover in attendance, looking flushed and rosy with the many congratulations which the news of her engagement called forth on every side ; and the younger boys, home from school for the occasion, getting in everybody's way, and directing their main attention to the ices in the refreshment-

tent. Such an afternoon-party, it was agreed, had not been held in Meadowshire within the memory of man ; but then, dear Mrs. Miller had such energy and such a real talent for organisation ; and if the company *was* a little mixed, why, of course, she must recollect Mr. Miller's position, and how important it was for him, with the prospect of a general election coming on, to make himself thoroughly popular with all classes.

No one in all the gay crowd was more admired or more noticed than "the bride," as she was still called, young Mrs. Kynaston. Helen had surpassed herself in the elaboration of her toilette. The country dames and damsels, in their somewhat dowdy home-made gowns, could scarcely remember their manners, so eager were they to stare at the marvels of that wondrous garment of sheeny satin, and soft, creamy gauze, sprinkled over with absolute works of art in the shape of

wreaths of many-hued embroidered birds and flowers, with which the whole dress was cunningly and dexterously adorned. It was a masterpiece of the great Worth; rich, without being gaudy, intricate without losing its general effect of colour, and, above all, utterly and absolutely inimitable by the hands of any meaner artist.

Mrs. Kynaston looked well; no one had ever seen her look better; there was an unusual colour in her cheeks, an unusual glitter in her blue eyes, that always seemed to be roving restlessly about her as though in search of something, even all the time she was saying her polite commonplaces in answer to the pleasant and pretty speeches that she received on all sides from men and women alike.

But through it all she never let Vera Nevill out of her sight; where Vera moved, she moved also. When she walked across

the lawn, Mrs. Kynaston made some excuse to go in the same direction ; when she entered either of the tents, Helen also found it necessary to go into them. But the crowd was too great for anyone to remark this ; no one saw it save Denis Wilde, whose eyes were sharpened by his love.

Once Helen saw that Maurice and Vera were speaking to each other. She could not get near enough to hear what they said, but she saw him bend down and speak to her earnestly, and there was a sad, wistful look in Vera's upturned eyes as she answered him. Helen's heart beat with a wild, mad jealousy, as she watched them ; and yet it was but a few words that had passed between them.

"Vera, young Wilde says you are going to marry him ; is it true ?"

"He wants me to do so, but I don't think I can."

“Why not? it would be happier for you, child; forget the past and begin afresh. He is a good boy, and by-and-by he will be well off.”

“You, too—you advise me to do this?” she answered with unwonted bitterness. “Oh, how wise and calculating one ought to be, to live happily in this miserable world!”

He looked pained.

“I cannot do you any good,” he said, rather brokenly. “God knows I would, if I could. I can only be a curse to you. Give me at least the credit of unselfishly wishing you to be less unhappy than you are.”

And then the crowd, moving onwards, parted them from each other.

“Do not forget to meet me at the Bath,” she called out to him as he went.

“Oh, to be sure! I had forgotten. I

will be there just before the dancing begins."

And then Denis Wilde took his place by her side.

If Mrs. Kynaston surpassed herself in looks and animation that day, Vera, on the contrary, had never looked less well.

Her eyes were heavy with sleepless nights and many tears; her movements were slower and more languid than of wont, and her face was pale and thin.

Meadowshire, generally, that had ceased to trouble itself much about her, when she had thrown over the richest baronet in the county, considered itself, nevertheless, to be somewhat aggrieved by the falling off in her appearance, and passed its appropriate and ill-natured comments upon the fact.

"How ill she looks," said one woman to another.

"Positively old. I suppose she thought

she could whistle poor Sir John back again, whenever she chose ; now he is out of the country she would give her eyes for him ! ”

“ I daresay ; and looks as if she had cried them out ; but he must be glad to have escaped her ! Well, it serves her right, for behaving so badly. I’m sure I don’t pity her.”

“ Nor I, indeed.”

And the two amiable women passed onwards, to discuss some other ill-fated victim.

But to the two men who loved her, Vera that day was as beautiful as ever ; for love sees no flaw in the face that reigns supreme in the soul. And Vera sat still in her corner of the tent where she had taken refuge, and leant her tired, aching head against a gaudy pink-and-white striped pillar. It was the tent where the flower-show was going on. From her sheltered nook there was not much that was lovely

to be seen, not a vestige of a rose or a carnation to refresh her tired eyes, only a counter covered with samples of potatoes and monster cauliflower; and there was a slab of white wood with pats of yellow butter, done up in moss and ferns, which had been sent from the 'principal dairy-farms of the county, and before which there was a constant succession of elderly and interested housewives, tasting and comparing notes. There seemed some difficulty in deciding to whom the butter prize was to be awarded, and at last a committee of ladies was formed; they all tasted, solemnly, of each sample all round, and then they each gave their verdict differently, so that it had all to be done over again, amidst a good deal of laughter and merriment.

Vera was vaguely amused by this scene that went on just in front of her. When

the knotty point was settled, the Committee moved on to decide upon something else, and she was left again to the uninterrupted contemplation of the Flukes and the York Regents.

Denis Wilde had sat by her for some time, but at last she had begged him to leave her. Her head ached, she said; if he would not mind going, and he went.

Presently, Beatrice, beaming with happiness, found her out in her corner.

"Oh, Vera!" she said, coming up to her, all radiant with smiles, "you are the only one of my friends who has not yet wished me joy."

"That is not because I have not thought of you, Beatrice, dear," she answered, heartily, grasping her friend's outstretched hands. "I was so very very glad to hear that everything has come right for you at last. How did it all happen?"

"I will come over to the vicarage to-morrow, and tell you the whole story. Oh! do you remember meeting Herbert and me, that foggy morning, outside Trip-ton station?"

Would Vera ever forget it?

"I little thought then, how happily everything was to end for us. I used to think we should have to elope! Poor Herbert, he was always frightened out of his life when I said that. But we have had a very narrow escape of being blighted beings to the end of our lives. If it hadn't been for uncle Tom, and that dear darling mare, Clochette, whom I should like to keep in a gold and jewelled stall to the end of her ever blessed days—! Ah, well! I've no time to tell you now—I will come over to Sutton to-morrow, and I may bring him; may I not?"

"Him," of course, meaning Mr. Herbert

Pryme. Vera requested that he might be brought, by all means.

“ Well, I must run away, now—there are at least a hundred of these stupid people to whom I must go and make myself agreeable. By the way, Vera, how dull you look, up in this corner by yourself. Why do you sit here all alone ? ”

“ My head aches, I am glad to be quiet.”

“ But you mean to dance, by-and-by, I hope ? ”

“ Oh, yes, I daresay. Go back to your guests, Beatrice ; I am getting on very well.”

Beatrice went off smiling and waving her hand. Vera could watch her outside in the sunshine, moving about from group to group, shaking hands with first one and then another, laughing at some playful sally, or smiling demurely over some graver words of

kindness. She was always popular, was Beatrice, with her bright talk and her plain clever face, and there was not a man or woman in all that crowd who did not wish her happiness.

And so the day wore away, and the polo match—very badly played—was over, and the votaries of lawn-tennis were worn out with running up and down—and the flowers and the fruits in the show-tent began to look limp and dusty. The farmers, and those people of small importance who had only been invited “from two to five,” began now to take their departure, and their carriage wheels were to be heard driving away, in rapid succession, from the front door. Then the hundred or so of the “best county people” who were remaining later for the dancing, began to think of leaving the lawns before the dew fell. There was a general move towards the house, and even

the band “limbered up,” and began to transfer itself from the garden into the hall, where its labours were to begin afresh.

Then it was that Vera crept forth out of her sheltered corner—and unseen, and unnoticed, save by one watchful pair of eyes, wended her way through the shrubbery walks in the direction of the Bath.

CHAPTER XI.

SHADONAKE BATH.

CALM and still, like the magic mirror of the legend, Shadonake Bath lay amongst its everlasting shadows.

The great belt of fir-trees beyond it, the sheltering evergreens on the nearer side, the tiers of grey, moss-grown steps that encompassed it about, all found their image again upon its smooth and untroubled surface. There was a golden light from the setting sun to the west, and the pale mist of a shadowy crescent moon had risen in the east.

It was all quiet here—faint echoes of distant voices and far-away laughter, came up in little gusts from the house ; but there

was no trace of the festivities down by the desolate water, nothing but the dark fir-trees above it, and the great white heads of the water-lilies, that lay like jewels upon its silent bosom.

Vera sat down upon the steps, and rested her chin in her hands, and waited. The house and the gardens behind her were shut out by the thick screen of laurels and rhododendrons. Before her, on the other side, were the fir-trees, with their red, bronzed trunks, and the soft, dark brown carpet that lay at their feet; there was not even a squirrel stirring among their branches, nor a bird that fluttered beneath their shadows.

Vera waited. She was not impatient or anxious. She had nothing to say to Maurice when he came—she did not mean to keep him, not even for five minutes by her side; she did not want to run any further risks with him—it was better not—better that she

should never again be alone with him. She only meant just to give him that wretched little brown paper parcel, that weighed upon her conscience with the sense of an unfulfilled vow, and then to go back with him to the house at once. They could have nothing more to say to each other.

Strangely enough, as she sat there musing, all her life came back in review before her. The old days at Rome, with the favourite sister who was dead and gone; her own gay, careless life, with its worldly aims and desires; her first arrival at Sutton, her determination to make herself Sir John Kynaston's wife, and then her fatal love for his brother; it all came back to her again. All kinds of little details that she had long forgotten came flooding in upon her memory. She remembered how she had first seen Maurice standing at the foot of the staircase, with the light of the lamp

upon his handsome head ; and then again, how one morning she and he had stood together in this very place by the Bath, and how she had told him, shuddering, that it would be dreadful to be drowned there, and she had cried out in a nameless terror that she wished she had not seen it for the first time with him by her side ; and then Helen had come down from the house and joined them, and they had all three gone away together. She smiled a little to herself over that foolish, reasonless terror. The quiet pool of water did not look dreadful to her now, only cool, and still, and infinitely restful.

By-and-by other thoughts came into her mind. She recalled her interview with old Lady Kynaston, at Walpole Lodge, when she had so nearly promised her to give back her hand to her eldest son, when she would have done so had it not been for

that sight of Maurice's face in the adjoining room. She wondered what Lady Kynaston had thought of her sudden change of mind; what she had been able to make of it; whether she had ever guessed at what had been the truth. It seemed only yesterday that the old lady had told her to be wise and brave, and to begin her life again, and to make the best of the good things of this world that were still left to her.

"There is a pain that goes right through the heart," Maurice's mother had said to her; "I who speak to you have felt it. I thought I should die of it, but you see I did not."

Alas! did not Vera know that pain all too well; that heartache that banishes peace by day and sleep by night, and that will not wear itself out?

And yet other women had borne it, and had lived and been even happy in other

ways, but she could not be happy. Was it because her heart was deeper, or because her sense of pain was greater than that of others ?

Vera could not tell. She only wished, and longed, and even prayed that she might have the strength to become Denis Wilde's wife ; that she might taste once more of peace, if not of joy ; and yet all her longings, and all her prayers, only made her realise the more how utterly the thing was beyond her power.

To Maurice, and Maurice alone, belonged her life and her soul, and Vera felt that it would be easier for her to be true to the sad dim memory of his love than to vow her heart and her allegiance to any other upon earth.

So she sat and mused, and pondered, and the amber light in the east faded away into palest saffron, and the solemn shadows

deepened and lengthened upon the still bosom of the water.

Suddenly there came a sharp footstep and the rustle of a woman's silken skirts across the stone flags behind her. She looked up quickly; Helen stood beside her. Helen in all the sheen of her gay Paris garments, with the evening light upon her uncovered head, and the glow of a passion, fiercer than madness, in her glittering eyes. Some prescience of evil—she knew not of what—made Vera spring to her feet.

Helen spoke to her shortly and defiantly.

"Miss Nevill, you are waiting here for my husband, are you not?"

A faint flush rose in Vera's face.

"Yes," she answered, very quietly. "I am waiting to speak a few words to him."

"You have something to give him, have you not? Some letters that are mine, and which you have probably read."

Helen said the words quickly and feverishly ; her voice shook and trembled. Vera looked surprised and even indignant.

" I don't understand you, Mrs. Kynaston," she began, coldly..

" Oh, yes, you understand me perfectly. Give me my letters, Miss Nevill ; you have no doubt read them all," and she laughed harshly and sneeringly.

" Mrs. Kynaston, you are labouring under some delusion," said Vera, quietly ; " I have no letters of yours, and if I had," with a ring of utter contempt, " I should not be likely to have opened them."

For it did not occur to her that Helen was speaking of Monsieur D'Arblet's parcel ; that did not in the least convey the idea of letters to her mind ; nor had it ever entered into her head to speculate about what that unhappy little packet could

possibly contain; she had never even thought about it.

"I have no letters of yours," she repeated.

"You are saying what is false," cried Helen, angrily. "How can you dare to deny it? You know you have got them, you are here to give them to Maurice, knowing that they will ruin me. You *shall* not give them to him. I have come to take them from you—I *will* have them."

"I do not even know what you are speaking about," answered Vera. "Why should I want to ruin you, if, indeed, such a thing is to be done?"

"Because you hate me, as much as I hate you."

"Hate is an ugly word," said Vera, rather scornfully. "I have no reason to hate you, and I do not know why you should hate me."

"Don't imagine you can put me off with

empty words," cried Helen, wildly. She made a step forward; her white hands clenched themselves together with a reasonless fury; she was as white as the crescent moon that rose beyond the trees.

"Give me my letters—the letters you are waiting here to give to my husband!" she cried.

"Mrs. Kynaston, do not be so angry," said Vera, becoming almost bewildered by her violence; "you are really mistaken—pray calm yourself. I have no letters; what I was going to give your husband, was only a little parcel from a man who is abroad—he is a foreigner. I do not think it is of the slightest importance to anybody. I have not opened it, I have no idea what it contains, and your husband himself said it was nothing, only I have promised to give it him alone; it was a whim of the little Frenchman who entrusted me with it, and

whom, I must honestly tell you, I believe to have been half mad. Only, unfortunately, I have promised to deliver it in this manner."

Mrs. Kynaston was looking at her fixedly ; her anger seemed to have died away.

"Yes," she said, "it was Monsieur D'Arblet who gave them to you."

"That was his name, D'Arblet. I did not like the man ; but he bothered me until I foolishly undertook his commission. I am sorry now that I did so, as it seems to vex you so much ; but I do not think there are letters in the parcel, and I certainly have not opened it."

Helen was silent again for a minute, looking at her intently.

"I don't believe you," she said ; "they are my letters sure enough, and you have read them. What woman would not do so in your place ? and you know that they will ruin me with my husband."

“It is you yourself that tell me so!” cried Vera, impatiently beginning to lose her temper. “I do not even know what you are talking about!”

“Miss Nevill!” cried Helen, suddenly changing her tone; “give that parcel to me, I entreat you.”

“I am very sorry, Mrs. Kynaston; I cannot possibly do so.”

“Oh, yes, you can—you will,” said Helen, imploringly. “What can it matter to you, now? It is I who am his wife; you cannot get any good out of a mere empty revenge. Why should you spoil my chance of winning his heart? I know, well enough, that he loves you, but—”

“Mrs. Kynaston, pray, pray recollect yourself; do not say such words to me!” cried Vera, deeply distressed.

“Why should I not say them? You and I know well enough that it is true. I hate

you, I am jealous of you, for I know that my husband loves you ; and yet, if you will only give me that parcel, I will forgive you—I will try to live at peace with you—I will even pray and strive for your happiness ! Let me have a chance of making him love me ! ”

“ For God’s sake, Mrs. Kynaston, do not say these things to me ! ” cried Vera. She was crimson with pain and shame, and shocked beyond measure that his wife should be so lost to all decency and self-respect as to speak so openly of her husband’s love for herself.

“ I will not, and cannot, listen to you ! ”

“ But you will not be so cruel as to ruin me ? ” pleaded Helen ; “ only give me that parcel, and I shall be safe ! You say you have not opened it ; well, I can hardly believe it, because, in your place I should have read

every word ; yet, if you will give them to me, I will forgive you."

"You do not understand what you are saying !" cried Vera, impatiently. "How can I give you what is not mine to give ? I have no right to dispose of this parcel ;" she held it in her hand ; "and I have given my word that I will give it to your husband alone. How could I be so false as to do anything else with it ? You are asking impossibilities, Mrs. Kynaston."

"You will not give it to me ?" There was a sudden change in Helen's voice—she pleaded no longer.

"No, certainly not."

"And that is your last word ?"

"Yes."

There was a silence. Helen looked away over the water towards the fir-trees. She was pale but very quiet, all her angry agitation seemed to have died away. Vera stood

a little beneath her on the lowest step, close down to the water; she held the little parcel that was the object of the dispute in her hands, and was looking at it with an expression of deep annoyance; she was wishing heartily that she had never seen either it or the wretched little Frenchman who had insisted upon confiding it to her care.

Neither of them spoke; for an instant neither of them even moved. There was a striking contrast between them: Helen, slight and fragile in her bird-of-paradise garments, with jewels about her neck, and golden chains at her wrist; her pretty piquant face, almost childish in the contour of the small, delicate features. Vera, in her plain, tight-fitting dress, whose only beauty lay in the perfect simplicity with which it followed the lines of her glorious figure; her pure, lovely face, laden with its burden of deep sadness, little turned away from the other

woman who had taken everything from her, and left her life so desolate. And there was the silent pool at their feet, and the darkening belt of fir-trees beyond, and the pale moon ever brightening in the shadowy heavens. It was a picture such as a painter might have dreamt of.

Not a sound—only once the faint cry of some wild animal in the far-off woods, and the flutter of a night-moth on the wing. Helen's face was turned eastwards towards the fast-fading evening glow.

What is it that sends the curse of Cain into the human heart?

Did some foul and evil thing, wandering homeless around that fatal spot, enter then and there unbidden into her sin-stained soul? Or had the hellish spirit been always there within her, only biding its time to burst forth in all its naked and hideous horror?

God only knows.

“Vera, gather me a water-lily! See how lovely they are. I am going back to dance; I want a water-lily.”

Vera looked up startled. The sudden change of manner, and the familiar mention of her name struck her as strange. Helen was leaning towards her, all flushed and eager, pointing with her glistening, jewelled fingers over the water.

“Don’t you see how white they are, and how they gleam in the moonlight, like silver? Would not one of them look lovely in my hair?”

“I do not think I can reach them,” said Vera, slowly. She was puzzled and half frightened by the quick, feverish words and manner.

“Yes, yes, your arms are long—much longer than mine; you can reach them very well. See, I will hold the sleeve of your

dress, like this ; it is very strong. I can hold you quite safely. Kneel down and reach out for it, Vera. Do, please, I want it so much. There is one so close there, just beyond your hand. Stoop over a little further ; don't be afraid ; I have got you tightly."

And Vera knelt and stretched out over the dark face of the waters.

Then, all at once, there was a cry—a wild struggle—a splash of the dark, seething waves—and Helen stood up again in her bright raiment alone on the margin of the pool ; whilst ever-widening circles stretched hurriedly away and away, as though terror-stricken, from the baleful spot where Vera Nevill had sunk below the ill-fated waters.

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Someone came madly rushing out of the bushes behind her. Helen screamed aloud.

"It was an accident ! She slipped for-

ward—her footing gave way!” gasped the unhappy woman in her terror. “Oh, Maurice, for pity’s sake, believe me; it was an accident!” She sank upon her knees, with wildly outstretched arms, and trembling, uplifted hands.

“Stand aside,” he said, hoarsely, pushing her roughly from him, so that she almost fell to the earth, and he plunged deep into the still quivering waters.

It was the water-lilies that brought her to her death. The long clinging stems, amongst which she sank, held her fair body in their cold, clammy embraces, so that she never rose again. It was long before they found her.

And, oh! who shall ever describe that dreadful scene by the margin of Shadonake Bath, whilst the terrified crowd that had gathered there quickly, waited for her whom all knew to be hopelessly gone from them for ever!

The sobbing, frightened women ; the white, stricken faces of the men ; the agony of those who had loved her ; the distress and dismay of those who had only admired her ; and there was one trembling, shuddering wretch, in her satins and her jewels, standing, white and haggard, apart, with knees that shook together, and teeth that clattered, and tearless sobs that shook her from head to foot, staring with a half-maddened stare upon the fatal waters.

Then when all was at an end, and the worst was known ; when the poor, dripping body had been reverently covered over, and borne away by loving arms, amid a torrent of sobs and wailing tears, towards the house, then someone came near her and spoke to her—someone off whom the water came pouring in streams, and whose face was white and wild as her own.

“ Get you away out of my sight,” said

the man whom she had loved so fruitlessly, to her.

“Have pity ! have pity !” was the cry of despair that burst from her quivering lips.

“Was it not all an accident ?”

“Yes, let it be so to the world, because you bear my name, and I will not have it dragged through the mire—to all others it is an accident—but never to me, for *I saw you let her go !* There is the stain of murder upon your hands. I will never call you wife, nor look upon your face again ; get yourself away out of my sight !”

With a low sobbing cry, she turned and fled away from him, and away from the place, out among the shadows of the fir-trees. Once again some one stopped her in her terror-stricken flight.

It was Denis Wilde who came striding towards her under the trees, and caught her roughly by the wrist.

“It is *you* who have killed her!” he said, savagely.

“What do you mean?” she murmured, faintly.

“I saw it in your face last night, when you were wandering about the house during the thunder-storm; you meant her death then. I saw it in your eyes. My God! why did I not watch over her better, and save her from such a Devil as you?”

“No, no, it is not true; it was an accident. Oh, spare me, spare me!” with a piteousness of terror, was all she could say.

“Yes; I will spare you, poor wretch, for your husband’s sake—because *she* loved him—and his burden, God help him! is heavy enough as it is. Go!” flinging her arm rudely from him. “Go, whilst you have got time, lest the thirst for your blood be too strong for me.”

And this time no one saw her go. Like

a hunted animal she fled away amongst the trees; her gleaming, many-hued dress, trailing all wet and drabbled on the sodden earth behind her, and the darkness of the gathering night closed in around her, and covered her, in mercy, with its pitiful mantle.

CHAPTER XII.

AT PEACE.

So Vera was at peace at last. The troubled life was over; the vexed question of her fate was settled for her. There was to be no more struggling of right against wrong, of expediency against truth, for her, for evermore. She had all—nay, more than all, she wanted now.

“It was what she desired herself,” said the vicar, brokenly, as he knelt by the side of her who had been so dear and precious to him. “Only a Sunday or two ago, she said to me, ‘If I could die, I should be at peace.’”

And Maurice, with hidden face at the foot of the bed, could not answer him for tears.

It was there, by that white still presence, that lay so calm and so lovely amongst the showers of heavy-scented waxen flowers, wherewith loving hands had decked her for her last long sleep; it was there that Eustace learnt at last the secret of her life, and the fatal love that had so wrecked her happiness. It was all clear to him now. Her struggles, her temptations, her pitiful moments of weakness and misery, her courageous strife against the hopelessness of her fate—all was made plain now—he understood her at last.

In Maurice Kynaston's passion of despairing grief, he read the story of her sad life's trouble.

Truly, Maurice had enough to bear; for he alone, and one other, who spoke no word of it to him, knew the terrible secret of her death; to all else, it was "an accident;" to him and to Denis Wilde,

alone, it was "murder." To him, too, the motive of the foul, cowardly deed had been revealed ; for tightly clasped in that poor dead hand, true to the last to the trust that had been given her, was the fatal packet of letters, that had been the cause of her death. They were all blotted and blurred, and sodden with the water, but there were whole sentences in the inner folds, that were sufficient for him to recognize his wife's handwriting, and to see what was the drift and the meaning of them.

Whom they were written to, when they had been penned, he neither knew, nor cared to discover ; it' was enough for him that they had been written by her, and that they were altogether shameful and sinful. With a deep and sickened disgust, he set fire to the whole packet, and scattered the blackened and smouldering ashes

into the empty grate. They had cost a human life, those reckless, sinful letters ; but for them, Vera would not have died.

The terrible tragedy came to an end at last. They buried her beneath the coloured mosaic floor of the new chancel, which Sir John had built at her desire ; and Marion smothered herself and her children in crape, and people shook their heads and sighed when they spoke of her ; and Shadonake was shut up, and the Millers all went to London ; and then the world went its way, and after a time it forgot her ; and Vera Nevill's place knew her no more.

* * * * *

After Christmas, there was a wedding in Eaton Square ; a wedding, small and not at all gay. Indeed, Geraldine Miller considered her sister next door to a lunatic, and she told herself it would be hardly

worth while to be married at all, if there was to be no more fuss made over her marriage than over Beatrice's. For there were no bridesmaids, and no wedding guests, only all the Millers, from the eldest down to the youngest, uncle Tom, and an ancient Miss Esterworth, unearthed from the other end of England for the occasion; and there were, also, a Mr. and Mrs. Pryme, a grave and aged couple — uncle and aunt to the bridegroom.

There was, however, one remarkable feature at this particular wedding; when the family party came down into the dining-room to take their places for the conventional breakfast, upon the plate of the bride's father were to be seen some very curious things.

These were a faded white lace parasol with pink bows; a pair of soiled grey *peau de*

suède gloves, and a little black whisp of a spotted net veil.

“ Bless my soul ! ” said the member for Meadowshire, putting up his eye-glasses ; “ what on earth is all this ? ”

“ I think you have seen them before, papa,” says the bride demurely, whilst uncle Tom bursts into a loud and hearty guffaw of laughter.

“ Good gracious me ! ” says Mr. Miller, turning rather red, and looking bewilderedly from his daughter to his wife ; “ I don’t really understand. Caroline, my dear, do you know the meaning of these—these—most extraordinary objects ? ”

Mrs. Miller draws near and examines the little heap of faded finery, critically. “ Why, Beatrice ! ” she exclaims in astonishment, “ it is your last summer’s sunshade, and a pair of your old gloves ; how on earth did they come here on your papa’s plate ? ”

“ I put them there ; I thought papa would like to see them again,” cries Beatrice, laughing ; “ he met them in Herbert’s rooms in the Temple one day last summer.”

“ *Beatrice !* ” falters her father, staring in amazement at her.

“ Yes, papa dear, don’t be too dreadfully shocked at me ; it was I, your very naughty daughter, who had gone on the sly to see Herbert in the Temple, and I ran into the next room to hide myself when I heard you come in ; and left those stupid tell-tale things on the table ! I don’t think, now I am Herbert’s wife, that it matters very much how much I confess of my improprieties, does it ? ”

“ Good gracious me ! ” says Mr. Miller, solemnly, and then turns round and shakes hands with his son-in-law. “ And I might have retained you for that libel case after all, instead of getting in a young fool who lost

it for me!" was all he said. And then the sunshade and the gloves were swept away, and they all sat down and ate a very good breakfast, and drank to the bride and bridegroom's health none the less heartily for that curious little explanatory scene at the beginning of the feast.

* * * * *

Maurice Kynaston has joined his brother in Australia, where, report says, they are doing very well, and rapidly making a large fortune; although, no one ever thinks that either brother will ever leave the country of his adoption, and return to England.

Old Lady Kynaston lives on alone at Walpole Lodge; she is getting very aged, and is a dull, solitary old woman, now; with an ever present sadness at her heart.

Before he left England, Maurice told her the story of his love for Vera, and the whole truth about her death. The old lady

knows that Vera and her fatal beauty has wrecked the lives of both her sons. There will be no tender filial hands to close her dying eyes, no troops of merry grandchildren to cheer and brighten her closing years. They will live away from her, and she will die alone. She knows it—and she is very, very sad.

In South Kensington there lives a gay, world-loving woman ; who keeps open house, and entertains perpetually. She has horses and carriages, and a box at the Opera, and is always to be seen, faultlessly dressed, and the gayest of the gay at every race-meeting, and at every scene of pleasure.

People admire her, and flatter her, and speak lightly of her too, sometimes, for it is generally known that Mrs. Kynaston is “separated” from her husband ; and, though a separation is a perfectly respectable thing, and has no possible connection with a divorce,

yet there are ugly whispers in this case, as to what is the cause of the dissension between the husband in Australia and the wife in London ; whispers, that often do not fall very far short of the truth. And, gay as she is, and light-hearted as she seems to be, there are times when pretty Mrs. Kynaston is more to be pitied than any wretched beggar who toils along the streets. For always there is the terror of detection at her heart, and the fear that her dreadful secret, known, as it is, to at least two persons on earth, may ooze out—be guessed by others.

There are things Mrs. Kynaston can never do : to read of some dreadful murder, such as occasionally fills all the papers for days with its sickening details, makes her shut herself in her own room till the horrible tragedy is over and forgotten ; to hear of such things spoken of in society causes

her to faint away with terror. To walk by a pond, or even to speak of being rowed upon a lake or river, fills her with such horror of soul that none of her friends ever care to suggest a water-party of any kind to her.

“She saw that poor Miss Nevill drowned,” say her compassionate acquaintances; “it has upset her nerves, poor dear, she cannot bear the sight of water.” And there are a few who think, and who are not ashamed to whisper their thoughts with bated breath, that she saw Miss Nevill’s sad death too near and too well to be utterly spotless in the matter.

That she allowed her to perish without attempting to save her, because she was jealous of her, is the generally received impression—but there is no one who has quite realized that she was actually guilty of her death.

Did they think so, they could not eat her dinners with decency. And they do eat her dinners, which are uncommonly good ones; and they flock to her house, and they sit in her carriage and her opera-box, and take all they can get from her—although at their hearts they do not care to be intimate with her. But then money covers a multitude of sins. And a great many crimes may be glossed over, if we are only rich enough and popular enough, and sufficiently the fashion!

As to Denis Wilde, he was young, and in time he got over it and married an amiable young lady who bore him three children and loved him devotedly, so that after a while he forgot his first love.

Shadonake Bath has been drained. Mr. Miller has at last been allowed to have his own way about it. It is an ill wind that

blows nobody any good, and there could be found no voice to plead for its preservation after that terrible tragedy of which it was the scene.

So the old steps have all been cleared away, and brick walls line the straight deep sides, whereon grow the finest peaches and nectarines in the county, whilst a parterre of British queens and hautboys cover the spot where Vera died, with their rich red fruit and their luxuriant foliage.

And at Sutton things go on much the same as of old. Old Mrs. Daintree is dead, and no one sorrowed much for her loss, whilst the domestic harmony is decidedly enhanced by her absence. Tommy and Minnie are growing big and lanky, and the subject of schools and education is beginning to occupy the minds of Marion and her husband.

But the vicar has grown grey and old ; his back is more bent and his face more careworn than it used to be. He has never been quite the same since Vera's death.

There is a white marble monument in the middle of the chancel, raised by the loving hands of two brothers far away in Australia. It is by the best sculptor of the day, and on it lies a pale white figure, with a pure delicate profile, and hands always meekly crossed upon the bosom.

Every Sunday, as Eustace Daintree passes from his place at the reading-desk up to the altar to read the Communion Service, there falls upon it a streak of sunshine from the painted window above, which he himself and his wife had put up to her memory, lighting up the pale marble image with a chequered glory of gold and crimson. And the vicar's eye as he passes, alights for a

moment with a never-dying sadness upon
the simple words carved at the foot of
her tomb,

“VERA NEVILL, AGED 23.

AT PEACE.”

THE END.

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